Shady Tones of Home

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Shady Tones of Home

by Kathar

Summary

Clint is always glad to see his brother Barney-- even when he's showing up unannounced at his door to berate him about ruining an op Clint didn't even know he was involved in. He just... don't know how to be what Barney needs. How to keep him from leaving, over and over.

It's Phil-- Phil who has no living family at all and never did have any siblings-- who invites Barney in, Phil who feeds him millet bake, Phil who asks Clint if maybe, just maybe, Barney feels the same as Clint does. If maybe he actually *does* want to stay.

Honestly, Barney only showed up at his brother's door to find out what happened in Driftless-- and okay, maybe just a little because his brother has *once again* failed to tell him he's in a relationship and he'd like to meet the guy before the divorce this time. But that's not why he keeps coming back.

Notes

This is a sequel to Driftless, set mostly between the last chapter and the epilogue, except for the last two chapters.

It was originally meant to be a 5x1, but damned if I could ever define exactly what the 5 times *are*. "Five times Barney and Phil. And one time... Phil and Barney?" That's it. That's all I got. You read it, and maybe you can tell me.

Should be readable without reading Driftless, but it naturally contains major spoilers. Work is complete; I'm just editing now. Chapters should post every 1-2 days.

Title from Trampled by Turtles My Brother Works for the CIA.

As always, all my love and affection to JHSC , Laura Kaye, and Faeleverte. Without them, nothing. And major thanks to Gth694e as well for cheerleading and hand-holding.

See the end of the work for more notes

Chapter 1: Reno, Nevada Fall 2007

It was late afternoon by the time Jasper Sitwell got himself through the back-up at the check-in desk and up to his room, and he finished unpacking just at that unreasonable time of day that was slightly too early for dinner and slightly too late to take a nap. He laid on the bed staring at his socked toes for about fifteen minutes, then sighed and got up.

Too late for a nap, too early for dinner, and the evening before a conference was prime schmoozing time. As much as Jasper would have liked to just putter around his room indefinitely, re-arranging his charging cables and scrolling through the channels on tv, he was being paid to be bait. Lazing around on the dubious comfort of a hotel queen was not going to get any fish hooked.

He went downstairs, shaking his shoulders until they slumped and rolling up his sleeves.

Patsy time.

The elevator doors opened onto the lobby and Phil, waiting with laptop bag slung over his shoulders and wheelie bag canted against his thigh, eyes trained on the carpet. His face was the same amiable blank he'd worn everywhere from congressional hearings to the sub-basement torture chamber of a separatist cell in Akron. He looked up, saw Jasper, and winced.

It was there and gone again in a flash, replaced by the little eye-crinkle of warmth that seeing Jasper usually produced on his face.

"Just now checked in?" Jasper asked.

Phil nodded.

"Only took forty-five minutes."

They stood, looking at each other, just long enough that the elevator doors closed behind Jasper. Phil cursed under his breath.

"You ever wonder why hotels never staff up the front desk when they know they have a conference coming in?" Jasper asked, trying to act natural. When had it gotten so hard to find things to say to Phil?

(Four months ago around a breakfast table in Phil's house, was when.)

"Two," Phil said, leaning around him to punch the up button. At Jasper's look of confusion he added, "woman in front of me in line was for the other conference. We got to talking. And I don't know— probably some hotels do. Just not ones that accept the government rate. At this point, if I saw a well-staffed front desk I'd suspect a mole."

Jasper's turn to wince. Phil caught it, and turned a little green.

“Not that—” he stopped, his ability to bullshit having apparently deserted him at the worst moment.

Fuck Nick Fury anyway , Jasper thought viciously. Fuck him, and Alexander Pierce, and Phil, and also Clint Barton— *especially* Clint Barton— for having been the one to stumble over the mole in SHIELD. The mole(s) plural in SHIELD. The ones Jasper’d been assigned to infiltrate, four months back.

The ones he was supposed to report back to anytime Phil Coulson did anything interesting.

And yes, fuck Phil, for making Jasper drag them both back out of the danger zone.

“Not that they’d necessarily be after us, anyway. Best Practices in Interagency Cooperation isn’t exactly full of redactions. Could always be the other convention.”

Phil’s eyes crinkled up again, and he beamed gratitude at Jasper. At least, Jasper preferred to believe it was gratitude.

“A mole would… be pretty apropos, actually, ” he said.

It wasn’t gratitude after all. Jasper knew that stupid, fatuous look. It was a *pun* . And somehow Jasper was the butt of it.

“Who… did you say the other convention was?”

“I didn’t."

The elevator dinged as he said it, and he picked up his wheelie bag and began to move around Jasper. He was in the elevator, doors closing, when he grinned and added “But don’t worry, you’ll figure it out real quick.”

Jasper sighed, and looked around for the bar. He had a headache, all of a sudden, and needed something to drown it.

The bar was as crowded with spooks, spies, LEOs, and G-people as Jasper had expected it to be at 4:45 in the afternoon the day before a convention. Happy hour was two-for-tacos, so not only was the bar *full* , nearly everyone in it was salsa-spotted. Jasper gave into the inevitable, got himself a half-price tap that wasn't too aggressively hopped, and went looking for either an open seat or a friendly face.

He found the open seat first; a whole half-table, in fact. It was probably open by virtue of being right on the edge of the restaurant and facing the lobby, so everyone had to be on *moderately* good behavior. Of course, it could also have been open because the other half of the table was filled with what were *transparently* FBI agents, but beggars, choosers. At least they weren’t CIA.

Jasper sat.

He nearly immediately regretted it, too. The FBI agent closest to him— skinny, white, blonde, probably went straight from an Ivy to Quantico— was leaning over the table and

talking about him in a very overdone undertone.

“No, no,” he was saying to his cross-table companion, a short asian woman with a sharp gaze, “Don’t worry about him. I saw him at that one conference in Topeka; he’s SHIELD, not CIA.” His companion muttered something about being relieved, but he kept on going. “Come to think of it, he was here with what-his-name— you know the one. SHIELD guy with the little black book bigger’n some dictionaries. What’s his name?”

“Coulson,” said his companion, looking suddenly a lot more dubious about talking with the guy.

“Coulson. Right,” said the guy. “Jeez, there’s like a line every year to get a piece of him.”

The companion muttered something like “you only *wish* you could get a piece of him, Chad,” and Jasper fought not to snort into his beer.

Seriously, though, it was like this *every year* , at *every conference* . Phil’s reputation was a little overstated, but had enough kernels of truth that Jasper had learned to text not call any time he needed to coordinate with Phil at a conference. Jasper’d asked him once if Phil actually got laid outside the professional development circuit, and Phil’d opened his mouth, blinked once, then shut it again and very quickly changed the subject.

The FBI agents were still talking, side-eyeing him now like they might be working up their courage to *ask* him something. Chad opened his mouth, a gleam in his eye, and—

“Hey, SHIELD guy, got a question for you.”

Chad spun to stare at the guy who’d spoken— reasonable, since he was at the far end of the table and had had to boom his voice to be heard. Big, red-haired, surprisingly tan, suit a little scuffed, and a kind of deliberately genial air.

“Shoot,” Jasper told him, seeing no way out.

The guy leaned forward.

“You know what the other convention is? Front desk was weirdly vague about it.”

Jasper decided that, whoever this guy was, he liked him.

“No clue,” he responded and then, because the devil seemed to have hold of him, “But my colleague Agent Coulson talked to one of them at check-in.”

“Of course he did,” muttered Chad, in what he probably thought was a *sotto voce* , “probably already a line.”

“Gonna be a long wait,” Jasper said in his very best patsy, smiling wide and preparing to drop the bomb that Phil had recently burned his black book. Metaphorically speaking, anyway. “In fact—”

“Sitwell!” someone chortled, while at the same time clapping him on the shoulder. “My man!”

“John!” Jasper replied, glad he’d already patsied up for Chad. He didn’t think he could have pulled on a friendly face quite so quickly otherwise. Or stopped himself from getting an armlock on John Garrett and flipping him over the table.

Of course, the guy was slimy enough he’d have just wriggled out of it.

“I see you’ve already made friends. You work fast, don't ya? Room for more of us here? Hi, I’m John Garrett; any friend of Jasper’s.” Garrett reached out and shook hands with Chad without even drawing a breath, then shoved Jasper down towards the FBI end of the table. “You’ve gotta be FBI, right? Well, hey, could be worse. Could be CIA.”

The red-haired agent, who’d been watching Garrett bemusedly, grimaced his agreement.

“Have a seat,” he said, a little redundantly. “And your friends.”

“Sure thing,” Garret grinned. “Rollins, Hauer, meet the Feebs. Hey, Triplett, you belly up to the bar for us, all right?”

Agent Triplett had been the odd man left out when Rollins and Hauer, two kind of nondescript white agents, had taken up the remaining seats. Triplett, a tall black kid Jasper remembered vaguely from lectures at the ops academy, flashed a too-bright smile and left. Jasper assumed Garrett had convinced him this kind of shit was what all junior agents went through— like hazing. Hell, Garrett being Garrett, he might even believe it.

While Jasper’d been stewing in sourness, Garrett had gotten introductions from the other FBI agents, and was on his way to charming Chad. And Jasper supposed he had to let *himself* be charmed, too. Even though— in fact, *especially because* — he was nearly certain Garrett had been the one to narc on Phil and Clint Barton when they were undercover in Driftless.

Director Fury’d asked him to try and make Garrett his new best friend. Not that Jasper thought anyone was ever going to buy that. Even his legendary patsy had its limits. But he *did* need to start at least *trying* to be nice to Garrett.

Ugh.

Bad enough Garrett was probably a secret blood-cult Nazi from an organization thought eradicated in the 1940s; he was also the skeeviest SOB Jasper'd met. And the greasiest. Jasper objected to that too.

And the turtlenecks.

And the back slapping, of course.

As Garrett brought his hammy palm down on Jasper’s shoulder blades again, Jasper gave in to the brief urge to pray for the ground to swallow him up.

It didn’t.

“So, Jas, where’s your buddy Phil? Up to it already, huh?”

Where was an earthquake when you really needed it?

“Only just got his key card, so probably unpacking,” Jasper told him, turning with the same smile he’d given Chad so recently. “Line at check-in was ludicrous. I spent a half hour in it, sandwiched between some US Marshals and someone from the Park Service. How long’d it take you guys?”

“Oh, I got here early,” Garrett smiled. “They’ve got a sauna in the pool room; hadda take advantage of that.”

“Lucky sonuvabitch. It took me twenty minutes to check in,” Rollins put in, and they were off.

Jasper sighed an inward sigh of relief and leaned back to let Chad get his own whine in. By the time Triplett came back with beers, the FBI agents had started to warm up to the SHIELD contingent, and Jasper could be content with passing little anecdotes of previous conference snafus, laughing a little too obsequiously, and just generally giving off the impression of being friendly without having to actually be friends.

One step at a time. One step at a time.

He’d nearly relaxed into a gently-buzzed state of congeniality, when Garrett straightened up and cursed.

“What the *fuck* is Phil doing?” he asked.

Jasper turned.

Phil was standing in the center of the lobby, tie shucked, collar open, hands tucked in pants pockets like he somehow *owned* the place, and talking with a six-foot-tall tiger.

A six-foot-tall Siberian tiger.

In a sailor suit.

“Oh my god, that’s what Phil meant,” Jasper muttered, awed. “The *rat bastard* .”

“That is… my god, even for *Phil,* that’s….” Garrett sounded entranced.

“No, but, why is there a mascot in the lobby?” Chad asked, “is… there… a team or something? Staying here?”

“That’s not a mascot,” his companion— Mai Nia— told him, with a great deal of relish.

“No it is not,” Jasper sighed.

“I… I don’t…” Chad looked between them all, his brows furrowed in so far Jasper wasn’t sure they weren’t going to slide off his nose.

“It’s a furry,” Rollins told him, with elaborate patience. Jasper felt a pang of sympathy for him.

“Yes, but, why… here?”

“Because there’s a furry convention here this weekend, Chad,” the red-haired FBI guy— whose name Jasper had missed— explained. “As in, a convention where people dress up in fur-suits and….”

“Socialize,” Jasper finished the sentence, before Garrett could break in with whatever he wanted to say. He needn’t have bothered; Garrett had apparently decided Chad wasn’t going to be fun enough to poke and was waving wildly at Phil.

And shouting, of course.

Maybe it was his voice that was causing Jasper’s temples to throb.

Then again, maybe it was the thought of having to play patsy and cozy up to Garrett and company at the same time as he was supposed to be— was actually, was trying to remain— friends with Phil, who Garrett probably still thought might know that Garrett was a double agent Nazi blood-cult.

No.

No, no, no, Jasper couldn’t think about it that way, or he wouldn’t make it through.

Why the hell was he finding it so hard to keep patsying this time? This was supposed to be his goddamn area of strength.

Phil, showing a tragic lack of consideration for Jasper’s shaky mental state, had responded to Garrett’s hails and was walking towards them. FBI Chad straightened up in a completely not-nonchalant fashion that Jasper hoped his boss had spotted. Sending that guy undercover would be a death sentence.

He drooped again a moment later. Phil had just been accosted by a svelte silver-blue fox in a 1900s frilled bathing suit. He took her arm, shrugged to Jasper and Garrett apologetically and mouthed “dinner,” then sauntered off. The Siberian tiger joined them a moment later, and they all disappeared into a private banquet room.

“What just happened there?” Garrett asked, sounding a little stunned.

Jasper thought it was pretty obvious. Clearly, Phil had been adopted by the furries— fursonas? Fur-people? People with affinities for fur? Jasper thought he vaguely remembered that “furries” was like “trekkies” and *not cool* , but he’d lost whatever preferred terminology they used. Phil would have known. Christ, the next time he saw Phil he’d probably not only get *that* , but also an impromptu lecture on the history of fursuits, their construction, fashion trends, and societal implications. Jasper would be lucky if he got away without a PowerPoint and at least five puns.

Obviously.

Well— apparently not obviously to the rest of the table, ugh.

“Yow, I never knew Coulson liked it that kinky,” Rollins was saying.

Chad made a sound that was half *yick* and half *hngh* . It must have been uncomfortable.

“Chrissake, Colton—” his boss grumbled at him in an undertone.

“Then you haven’t heard half my good stories,” Garrett replied to Rollins, the goddamn liar.

“Hah, you’ve never roomed next to Phil at a conference,” Jasper broke in, wondering if Garrett would notice the subtle dig or not.

Garrett did not— or if he did, he had a better poker face than his losses the last time they were in Vegas together would suggest.

“Oho, Sitwell, I bet. You gotta share some of those, man,” he grinned.

Jasper’s stomach sank, especially as Chad leaned in eagerly. His boss and Mai Nia, Jasper noted, both seemed disenchanted with the whole conversation. Boss-guy was tipping back the last of his beer, clearly preparatory to leaving. If only Jasper could find an excuse to join them.

“Hey, waitaminute though,” Rollins broke in, some long-forgotten synapse seemingly sparking to life in his brain at last, “aren't Coulson and Hawkeye dating? Thought I heard he was off the market?”

All eyes turned eagerly to the Fount of All Phil Knowledge, as Jasper supposed he was. Even FBI Boss had put his empty glass down and leaned forward, looking startled. Or dyspeptic. Phil was going to owe him *big* for this.

“Yes, he and Barton are together now,” Jasper sighed. *Now can we stop making me recall his goddamn conference extracurriculars? The beer isn’t good enough to make up for* that.

“Doesn’t mean he’s dead from the waist down,” Garrett waved that away. “Red-blooded man like Phil? No way he’s gonna lock that up when his boy’s not around. Anyway, they’ve been hooking up since that mess down in Driftless. Can’t last much longer now. Right, Jas?”

Wrong .

At least, Garrett’d *better* be wrong. Jasper wasn’t going to endure Phil’s sappy texting face, *or* the memory of naked Hawkeye greeting him in Phil’s apartment, for anything less than ‘till death do them part.

“They actually seem pretty serious,” he temporized. “I was surprised.”

“So he *is* off the market?” Chad asked, his eyes darting between Jasper and Garrett. “Then what’s with the… the…”

“Fursuiters,” his boss supplied in a bone-dry voice.

“Yeah. Them. What’s up with them?”

“Knowing Phil? He probably got invited to dinner and didn’t want to be impolite. Or maybe he’s doing field research for undercover ops. Who knows?” Jasper said.

“Yeah, really *hands-on* research,” Garrett chortled. Jasper kept his gaze focused on FBI Boss, just so he didn’t turn around and roast Garrett alive with his eyeballs. FBI Boss looked like he was trying to think of a tactful way to ask something. Probably *can we all pretend to be professionals, here?*

“Well, if he *is* off the market, it’s too bad for you SHIELD guys,” Mai Nia broke in, glaring at Garrett nearly hotly enough to satisfy Jasper’s ire. “He buys SHIELD more goodwill at conferences than the rest of you combined.”

Jasper wisely drowned his *hear, hear* in his beer.

Apparently his forbearance finally paid off— Garrett turned the subject to something more self-aggrandizing, and Jasper could relax. The FBI Boss finished his beer and collected his colleagues, clearly heading for dinner any place except where the SHIELD team was headed.

“You coming with us to dinner, Sitwell, or you wanna join Coulson? Looks like there’s enough furries for you both,” Garrett leered.

“I’m with you,” Jasper replied, slamming his beer. Passed the first test. Somehow. “Where we headed?”

“How do you feel about Casanova’s?” Rollins asked.

And here came the second test, right on schedule. He’d expected infiltrating Hydra to be morally repugnant, but did it also have to be *tacky* ?

“I hear they have a steak special tonight,” Jasper told him, sliding off his stool. “Can’t go wrong with that.”

As he followed the group towards the door, though, he cast a longing look over his shoulder at the banquet hall Phil’d disappeared into.

That was not, sadly, the end of the discussion about Phil’s sex life for the conference. In fact, Jasper ended up talking about it far more frequently than he ever had when Phil was still bedding all and sundry (especially the sundry.) Word had apparently got *around* that Jasper was in the know— Jasper blamed Chad, on sheer principle— and consequently *he* got accosted by people trying to find out if Phil really didn’t want to be accosted anymore. Even FBI Boss asked Jasper to introduce him— and honestly, Jasper’d thought better of FBI Boss. He’d seemed sympatico for a while there. Went to show that you just couldn’t tell with some people.

At least FBI Boss had waited for a break in a breakout session to ask, and done it discreetly. Nothing like being asked about your best friend’s love life when you’re at the urinals. Twice.

It got so bad Jasper actually looked forward to breakouts with Garrett, Rollins and Hauer. Nobody came near him when he was with them.

Phil got pulled back to DC to deal with an incident early in the second day of the conference. Jasper watched him go— waving genially to a handsome green snake in a pirate hat on his way out the door— with a certain bleak sense of relief. At last he could concentrate on the simple task of infiltrating an evil organization that had already infiltrated his own. He put Phil, Clint, and the fursuiters out of his mind. By the time he got back to DC, he was so far entangled with Rollins and his crowd that he didn't feel much like talking to Phil at all. It just felt… dirty. And so, even if he would have mentioned to Phil that a big, red-haired FBI guy had taken a brief interest in him, he didn't get the chance.

Which was too bad for Phil.

Chapter 2: November 2007, Arlington, VA

Chapter Summary

Phil, Clint, and an unexpected visitor.

When Phil saw the man standing in front of his door, glaring at the unhelpfully-blank nameplates next to the doorbells, he strongly considered turning on his heel and heading back to the bus stop. It'd been a long day and a long commute, much of it in a cold November rain that seeped through the seams of even the most boiled of wools or plushest of fleeces. He'd left the car at the SHIELD remote lot for Clint— who was due home from a mission maybe in an hour, maybe in a day. So on top of being damp and exhausted, he was lonesome.

A stranger on his stoop was the last thing he needed. But he was too damn wet and cold to feel like sneaking away-- and anyway the prospect of making some poor jerk as miserable as Phil felt was more enticing than it ought to be.

"Excuse me," he said when he'd reached the bottom of his steps, just out of arm's reach.

The guy stiffened, then turned.

"You're Coulson," he said— or maybe *accused* would be the more accurate verb.

Phil wasn't entirely paying attention, he was too busy trying to remember where he'd seen the guy before. Big, broad-shouldered, red hair, face a little bit messed about, eyes… really familiar. Lips, too, come to think of it. And hands.

"And you're standing my front steps," he told the guy, "so I'm surprised that's a surprise. Who're you looking for?"

The guy glowered at him a little more, but in the face of Phil's best couldn't-melt-butter face, he finally huffed and said:

"Clint. Barton. Supposed to live here now."

"He's… not available right now," Phil said slowly, trying to identify the prickle that was running up the back of his neck. It wasn't *quite* fight-or-flight. It wasn't pure curiosity though, either. *Something* was off. "Who can I say was looking for him?"

The guy reached in his breast pocket two-fingered— the kind of deliberate *this isn't a gun I'm going for* move Phil himself had mastered— and pulled out a badge wallet.

"Special Agent Barton," the guy said, flipping it open and holding it out. "FBI."

The penny dropped. So did Phil's jaw.

" *Barney* ?" he asked, incredulously.

"What?" Barney Barton responded, nearly dropping his badge.

"You're Clint's brother," Phil told him, though clearly Barney *knew* that.

Even if the last name hadn't been a giveaway, Barney had Clint's hands. The Barton hands, Phil guessed, which was a little disconcerting. Clint's hands were so distinct— knob-knuckled, flat-nailed, capable, devastating— that he couldn't quite conceive of anyone else sharing them. Seeing them on Barney felt like a usurpation.

"I know I'm Clint's brother, I—" Barney paused, shaking his head, a motion that on Clint it would've meant *confused and suspicious. "* How do *you* know?"

"How… wouldn't I know? You're his brother; he talks about you."

As he said it, though, Phil felt something cold settle in his gut. Clint had talked about Barney as a childhood memory: his companion in foster care, his co-conspirator when they ran off to join the circus. He had never talked about Barney the *adult* .

Of course, they hadn't had much time; it'd been little more than four months since they'd decided to make the fake relationship from their Driftless mission real. It hadn't even occurred to Phil to think it was weird that Clint hadn't invited him to meet his only remaining family— in fact, it was potentially still not weird.

"Clint does not talk about me," Barney told him, eyes narrowing. "Clint *never* talks about me."

Well. *Now* it was weird.

"Not often, no," Phil told him, trying for a soothing nonchalance while re-settling his weight in case Barney rushed him. "But he told me some things about you two in foster care—" he caught Barney's wince and changed tack. "Uh… nothing major. Little things. Um… trips to Menard's with one of your foster parents. Childhood stuff."

Barney froze a moment, repeating *childhood stuff* soundlessly.

Then he straightened up, the this-could-be-a-fight tension dropping off of him like a loose bathrobe.

"He told you about Menard's," Barney said, sounding stunned. He shook his head, looking around him helplessly. "Well. Okay. Didn't even tell his ex-wife I existed. Didn't tell me *she* existed till after the divorce. But you, he tells about Menard's."

So, Clint *had* been in contact with his brother as an adult then— thank god. Phil erased a whole set of future awkward long-lost relative conversations off his mental decision tree. After a moment's hesitation, he also erased several of the *Barney is here to hurt Clint* options, as well. Not… all of them. But a few.

Barney was still looking at him a little lost— and a little wary, again.

“We… try to be open with each other,” Phil said cautiously. “As much as our work allows, anyway.”

“Right. Your work,” Barney snorted. “Which reminds me. This is actually a business call. I need to talk to Clint— and probably you, I hear— about some of your actions in Driftless this past July.”

“You couldn’t do that through official channels?” Phil asked, hoping he’d managed to control his face before it went completely slack. Or before he blushed— some of his actions at Driftless had been a little explosive. And others… well, others had been explosive, too, and just as public, just… god he hoped there wasn’t video.

“Yeah, I’d really prefer not,” Barney said, wincing. It didn’t make Phil feel any better. “Frankly, I probably shouldn’t be here at all.”

“Ah,” Phil said, as if he saw. Which he did not. “Then you’d better come in.”

“All right,” Phil said, turning to watch Barney Barton over his shoulder as he locked the door. “How did you know about the Driftless op?”

Barney paused, caught in the middle of taking off his wet overcoat while not-really-subtly casing Phil’s foyer.

“Coulson,” he sighed, fixing Phil with a look that reminded him way too much of Clint at his most *what the fuck, Phil* , “pretty sure every alphabet agency with a broom closet in the region heard about the Driftless op. Or participated in the coordinated fucking incident response.”

“Fair enough." Phil took his overcoat and hanging it on an empty wall peg. “But our identities were redacted in the reports. This way to the living room.”

Barney waited until they were in the living room, then flopped over Phil’s couch with a sigh, clearly settling in for the long haul. Phil leaned a hip against the nearest bookshelf and looked pointedly at him.

“They were indeed. I was planning to go through official channels,” Barney said at last, rolling his eyes. “Honest. But some of your agents have really loose lips after a drink or two.”

Phil cast his mind back over the agents on the ground at Driftless— the only ones he could really have seen letting something slip were the trainees, and he doubted Barney’d been drinking around junior SHIELD agents from Kansas City lately.

“Where?” he asked, maybe a little sharper than he’d intended— but then, *none* of this was making him feel more relaxed around Clint’s suddenly-not-prodigal brother.

“Reno. You were there. National Security Professional Best Practices in—”

“Oh god, right,” Phil cut him off. “NSPBPIAC.” Only he pronounced it *nes-peb-pee-ack,* because the conference conveners hated that.

And he hated going.

But so did everyone else at SHIELD, and Phil was pretty sure he’d been sent as a subtle message from Fury about the very messy, very expensive end of the Driftless op. The only other SHIELD personnel there were the ones Fury thought needed a remedial lesson in at least pretending to play nicely with others. Which was John Garrett and a couple STRIKE agents— and poor Jasper, who was supposed to be infiltrating them.

“Oh!” So *that* was why Barney looked so familiar. Apart from his striking similarity to a face Phil saw every morning across from him in bed, anyway. “Your team was at the table with Jas— with Agent Sitwell and Agent Garrett.”

“And I heard a *lot* about you, Coulson.”

Barney’s grin was toothy nearly to the point of smarminess. Phil had no doubt he deserved it. He was pretty sure, looking back, that he’d slept with at *least* one member of Barney’s team at a past conference. And he knew exactly what Garrett had likely said. Turtlenecks and lechery were two of Garrett’s favorite non-work topics. But that wasn’t a discussion he really wanted to get into— least of all with Clint’s brother. And anyway, the much more urgent question was:

“Someone mentioned the Driftless op?”

Barney nodded grimly.

“Not gonna tell you who— spare you the trouble of reporting them. Mentioned you and Clint got yourselves into a mess in Driftless. Mentioned you were an item, too. *Didn’t* mention you were shacking up already, so that was a bit of a shock.” He looked backwards at the front door, like he still wasn’t sure he was in the right place. Or wasn’t sure about Clint moving in, which— well, Phil’d have to see evidence that Barney was actually *in touch* with his brother before he accepted any judgment from that direction.

“Anyway, I would’ve caught you there and introduced myself, but you disappeared with your fursuited friends,” Barney continued, pronouncing *fursuit* very carefully.

“You met Agent Garret; I assume you understand the impulse,” Phil told him, crossing his arms. “Actually, they were fascinating dinner companions. And the opening address was by the guy who voices Sgt. Whiskers on Dog Cops. I got his autograph for Clint.”

“Really?" Barney perked up, losing just a little of his dyspepsia. "That sounds a *lot* better than the head of the Southern Nevada Intelligence Exchange. Didn’t see you there, either. The 'brief' welcome went on for *forty-five minutes* . And they didn't open the breakfast buffet till it was done. I nearly threw fists with some guy from the Park Service over the last muffin in the lobby shop."

Now he sounded *exactly* like Clint-- looked like him too with his frown-- and Phil forced himself not to stare. At least he'd gotten Barney scowling at something other than himself.

“Right, yeah, I was afraid of that. I skipped the convocation— SilverTail’d invited me to a panel on fursuit construction for hot climates. Fabric choice, ventilation, even someone who was putting interior water lines in for cooling. I’d promised Clint I’d take notes. He’s doing an independent study this semester.”

Phil had deliberately turned his back as he talked and started puttering around in his normal post-work fashion, hoping it would help defuse the remaining tension. So he was a little surprised when Barney responded to that with

“Clint’s in college?” in a high, slightly tight voice. He turned to find Barney looking lost.

“Since the Driftless op, yeah,” Phil told him gently. “Online classes. Look, I’ve got to put the mail away and I want to ditch my tie. Can I get you anything to drink?”

“Just water,” Barney replied, still sounding shocked.

As Phil left the living room, he reconsidered his strategy. He’d been going for light baiting— if for no other reason than Barney didn’t need to be the *only* one implying perhaps Clint deserved someone better. There was a whole lot he wanted to know about Barney Barton before he’d feel entirely comfortable having him around his brother. But it wasn’t going to be any fun if Barney sounded like *that* when he did it.

He came back into the living room, glass in hand, in a generous frame of mind. Barney was standing in the middle of the room staring at the light recurve bow Clint had hung just over their wall-mount TV.

“Clint tell you about this bow?” Barney asked gruffly, not quite touching it.

“Memento from his circus days,” Phil replied. “The bow he used for his trick riding act, is that right?”

He handed over the water.

“Of course,” he added, with every ounce of nonchalance he could muster, “it’s also the only one that’s really small enough to use in a tight interior space like this. I figure that factored in.”

Barney snorted, and something in his face lightened for a moment. But only a moment.

“Sounds like him. Gave me a shock to see it here, though. Would’ve thought he’d ditched it while he was, uh, freelance. Trick had it made special for him. He ever talk about Trickshot?”

The way he said it made Phil sound positively chalant by comparison. Like there was quicksand under his words.

“No,” Phil told him, unsure whether that was good or bad, but figuring honesty was the best policy. “At least, not while he’s awake."

The name had come up once while Clint was asleep, but they had made a pact early on to ignore anything said while unconscious. Phil's dreams weren't exactly a box of kittens either.

“Well, maybe he *hasn’t* turned into a pod person then.”

Barney gave the bow one last glare, then turned away. He looked down at his water dubiously before drinking half of it in one long gulp.

“So, did I pass that test?” Phil asked him, feeling a little waspish, and abruptly *done.* He’d just gotten home, he was exhausted, a little damp, and he missed Clint more and more the longer he had to stare at a 50% DNA match for him.

Barney threw back his head and laughed.

“Starting to understand what my brother sees in you,” he said. “So… when *will* Clint be back?”

An excellent question.

“Dunno,” Phil told him. “Could be soon, could be not at all tonight.”

As he spoke, the proximity alarm blinked— someone had opened the garage. Someone who knew the security code.

“Or, it could be right now,” Phil finished.

The back door unlatched before Phil’d had time to do much more than position himself in the hallway.

“Hi home, I’m honey!” Clint called as he came in, trying to shove himself, two large duffels, and a plastic bag that wafted pho, into the house at the same time. He dropped the duffel bags in the hall then turned his back to do up the latches.

He only made this kind of incautious entrance when he knew Phil was home; after a few close calls where one or the other of them had thought there was an intruder, they’d re-set the alarms so that either of them could check the last entrance from the hall and garage control panels. Clint’s greeting was the other half of their welcome-home SOP: the verbal confirmation that the right person was coming through the door. It had been working well for them.

Well— until now.

Just as Clint started down the hall towards him, take-out in hand and already babbling a mile a minute, Phil realized there was a fly in the ointment. Er. Living room.

“Clint,” he started, “your—”

And then he was in Clint's arms, take-out containers bouncing against his thighs, and being bent over backwards while Clint kissed him hello very, very thoroughly.

"Cmmphf," Phil said against Clint's lips, when Clint finally straightened them both up.

"H'mm," Clint replied, and deepened the kiss enough to get exploratory with his tongue. Phil gave up on coherence for the moment and let himself be overwhelmed.

At least, until the unmistakable *ahem* behind him startled them both into stopping.

"— your brother's here," Phil finished, trailing off as he saw Clint's face go slack with shock.

"Hey."

To someone who didn't speak Barton, Barney probably sounded chill. Phil didn't make that kind of mistake these days. Neither did Clint. He stepped back from Phil abruptly-- and dropped the take-out bags.

"Barney?" he croaked, freezing.

Phil's blood ran cold. Had he been wrong? *Was* Barney Barton dangerous, or at least not welcome? And had Clint not thought to tell Phil?

Phil turned to find a smile pasted on Barney's face, just beginning to slip. He was looking more awkward than deadly.

"Hi," he said again, and waggled his fingers in an absurd little wave.

Clint unfroze.

"Oh my God, *Barney* ," he yelped.

He leapt over the coffee table, sending papers scattering. Barney tried to dodge backwards, but Clint was faster— he caught Barney by the lapel and pulled him into a tight hug.

"Oh my god," Clint repeated, his voice muffled now, low and rumbly and overwhelmed, "oh my god."

So… not unwelcome, then.

Phil bent down to clean up the spilled papers and give the Bartons a moment's privacy. He was still down when Clint pulled back to say

"Not that I'm not glad to see you, Barn, but what the hell are you doing here?"

"What am I doing here? Being pissed off— you nearly torpedoed my case, Clint. You and your boyfriend."

"Partner," Phil interjected.

Barney glanced down at him and blinked, a little thrown.

“Sorry,” he said slowly, turning back to his brother. “You and your *partner* , Clint. Driftless. I had a guy there; you nearly blew his cover.”

Now Phil felt a little thrown; he knew he’d been up his own ass during the Driftless op, but he *thought* he would have noticed if he’d stumbled into the middle of an FBI operation.

“So… you’re here to yell at me?” Clint asked. He was still holding on tight to Barney, but his voice had gone… well, Phil’d been on the receiving end of that tone of voice, and there had been a lot of bacon ground into the floor by the end of that conversation. “Of course. Of *course* you are. Why the hell else would my brother— who hasn’t even bothered to leave a goddamn note in our fucking drop box for the last year— risk his neck to come see me?”

Huh.

Well, no wonder Barney hadn’t gone through official channels. Undercover?

FBI, major case, blown cover— that explained… a lot.

Or maybe not; Barney was taking his turn to look at Clint askance.

“Clint… that assignment ended in January. We had the first round of trials in June. You didn’t get my message?”

“Uh. Something garbled about being in Witness Protection? On my voicemail? That one? Man, Barn, I was just back from Budapest and thought SHIELD was gonna throw me out on my ass. I assumed you were trying to offer me an out or something. I sent a thing to your drop box.”

“No, Clint,” Barney sighed. “I was trying to tell you *I* was in Witness Protection.”

“Um.” Clint glanced at the window— as did Phil. Blinds were down, thankfully. But Barney had been standing with him outside for a hell of a long time. Anyone could have seen. *Shit. “* You… do know how that works, right, Barn? No contact? Because yelling at me can’t be worth—” he broke off as Barney pulled out a second ID badge.

It was, Phil noticed, a US Marshall badge.

“FBI, you said,” he drawled.

Barney shrugged at him.

“Interagency detail-- it was full time back when I called you. Now it’s kind of as-needed ‘til the trials are done. It’s not standard protocol, but one of the guys we flipped wouldn’t trust anyone but me. And to be real honest, it keeps me on the down low for a while.”

“You *are* Witness Protection,” Clint said faintly, still staring at it.

“And *you* could’ve blown the cover of our star witness,” Barney told him.

“So you’re here to yell at me in person,” Clint sighed, still holding on to his shoulders, his fingers digging in like he was trying to root Barney in place. “Fucking typical.”

“Yeah I missed you too, asshole.” Barney told him.

Clint pulled him back in for a hug.

“Jerkwad,” he grumbled, his voice muffled in Barney’s collar.

Phil had never felt so much like an only child before— not even that one time in third grade when his best friend Kimberly had screamed at him for playing with her little brother. He decided he needed to be somewhere else for a bit.

“I’m just… going to go make dinner,” he said, picking up the takeout containers. The pho tubs had broken, and were leaking anise-scented broth into the carpet. “Which… won’t be take-out. Barney, I assume you’re staying.”

He didn’t wait for a response.

After stuffing the shattered containers to the kitchen trash, he got out a pan of millet bake that had been lurking in the freezer and turned on the oven. The brothers Barton could sort themselves out; Barney wasn’t an immediate danger and Clint had apparently had *more* than good reasons for not talking about his adult activities. Those were the important points, as far as Phil was concerned. Everything else could wait until after dinner.

Barney was bearing up under Clint’s clinginess surprisingly well, Clint thought. He hadn’t shoved Clint off once, or gone to hide in the bathroom until dinner was ready or *anything* . Still, as Clint let go of him after a post-dinner hug attack, he figured he should probably apologize.

“Sorry,” he said, stepping back out of touching range, “I don’t mean to keep attacking you. I… you just… it’s been a lot lately, and you haven’t been in touch-- I’m not saying I expected you to, I know about you and space and shit, but you’re here and it’s been forever, so I just….”

“Hey.” Barney put a hand on his shoulder, mercifully stopping the garbage coming out of his mouth. “I get it— I’m glad to see you, too. Honest, Clint. I missed you.”

He looked like he really did, too, all wide sincere eyes and kinda uncertain smile. And he’d *sounded* like he did, at dinner. Sounded actually interested in Clint’s life and in SHIELD and Driftless— and not just for work reasons.

“Yeah?” Clint found himself croaking.

“I mean…” Barney shrugged, glancing away before continuing, the way he’d always done when he had to tell the flat-out truth. “Yeah. Thought about you a lot, bro. Just… the hugging thing?”

The look on his face was classic— the same lemon-pucker he'd had when he'd spotted Clint's self-designed Hawkeye costume back when he'd first become a headliner in the circus.

"What about it?" Clint asked, trying to hide the amusement rising in his chest.

"You… planning to do that all night?"

Hah, yeah, there it was— exact same tone as *that sure is a… short skirt— kilt— you've got there* .

"Maybe," Clint confessed. "Why? Is it weird? Am I… am I making you uncomfortable?"

"A little, yeah."

"Oh, all right then—" Clint thumped Barney heartily on the shoulderblades— " *definitely* gonna do it all night."

For a breathless second, Clint wasn't sure he'd judged that one right. Maybe Barney'd stiffened up too much in the last however-long. Or maybe he was still in one of his standoffish periods. But then he saw a crinkle start at the corner of Barney's eye. A moment later and Barney was full-on guffawing, that whole-chest way he did, and something untied itself in Clint's chest.

He hadn't been this hungry for contact the last time he and Barney'd seen each other. Of course, if he *had* been, he wouldn't've done a thing about it— they'd met up just after Clint had signed on to SHIELD, before he'd properly started. Clint's mercenary reflexes wouldn't have taken well to hugging a fed, even an undercover one. Even a sibling. In hindsight, he'd been a fucking mess.

Barney hadn't been in much better shape, to be honest. Lots of shuffling, lots of teasing. Kinda like now, only with less full-body contact. Sometimes it felt like they couldn't stand to be around each other— well, at least Barney couldn't. Other times, though, it was like they couldn't find the door to leave— or at least, Clint couldn't.

So if Barney was going to let him hug this time, Clint was damn well gonna *hug* .

Hell, this time, Barney'd even made it all the way through dinner without fidgeting— though that might've been because he was so busy reaming them out. Which had set *Clint* to fidgeting. Over the years, Clint'd gotten so used to being yelled at by Barney for his own good that he'd come to expect it. Seeing *Phil* get yelled at, however politely, was a different story. Anyway, as Clint'd snarked back once Barney was good and done, this one really *hadn't* been their fault.

Well. Okay. The explosion at the Forkenbrock was at least fifty percent their fault. Maybe you could stretch and say the fire was, too. But how the hell'd they been supposed to know that the big mustachioed chutney vendor they'd chatted up at the farmer's market was in Witness Protection? (Though in retrospect it *did* explain the accent.) Or that Barney had put him there himself, taking a mobility assignment to the Marshals just for the purpose, because

the dude's bosses had fingers in government pies? Or that the noise Phil and Clint had made would get all the alphabets sniffing around Driftless, thus scaring the stool pidgeon chutney vendor witless?

(At this point in Clint's tirade, Phil had laid a hand on his arm to stop him, then non-apologized to Barney using a civilian version of his best SHIELD script and changed the subject. After that, dinner had actually been pretty nice.)

As they'd loaded the dishwasher, Phil had pointed out, watching Clint's face carefully, that Barney *could* have just sent an official complaint and left it. No need to come in person if he didn't want to. Then he'd shoved Clint out of the kitchen to talk to his brother. Who'd *still been there* , hadn't even gotten out his coat, so maybe Phil'd been right, and Barney was just awkward.

Clint *really* loved Phil sometimes. Like all the times sometimes. Even if he was hiding in the kitchen like a coward.

"Your guy gonna hide in the kitchen all night?" Barney asked, pulling away from Clint and flopping down on the couch like he owned the joint.

"Why? You didn't get enough chance to scope him out before I got here?" Clint replied, settling onto the armchair and leaning over so he and Barney nearly touched. "Or you wanna yell at him some more for shit we couldn't have helped?"

Barney shrugged.

"Can't a guy worry about his little bro?"

"Barn." Clint snapped the nickname out like a warning shot. This, he had not considered fully. Everyone in his life already knew Phil— he'd forgotten to consider what introducing him to someone *new* would be like. Especially a brother someone. Still. "I'm a grown man," he continued slowly. "And I know my own mind."

He could practically read *Bobbi Morse* in the lift of Barney's shaggy red eyebrow,and hurried on.

"Anyways, Phil's been vetted by the Black Widow, so you can just calm down."

"Black Widow never changed your diapers, Clint. Look—" Barney hesitated, looking suddenly thirteen and lost again for a second— "I don't mean to get up in your grill. And I know I'm not one to talk—"

"Yeah, no shit. How *is* your love life, Barn?" Clint sniped. He knew Barney'd had girlfriends — a girlfriend— back in the Circus days. And maybe there'd been a guy or two in there, too. And who knew who Barney'd had in the lost years between when Clint had run from Trickshot and he and Barney had first crossed paths again. But he'd never heard of anyone since. Barney'd… lived pretty lonely, now that he thought about it.

“Like I said,” Barney replied evenly. “I’m not one to talk. I never did get how you kept on—” he swept his hand around, indicating the whole house and, presumably, Clint and Phil within it— “after everything. It takes guts. I just want to make sure… I want to make sure you’re not setting yourself up for another mess like your divorce, okay? I remember you after that, Clint. I never wanna see you that lost again.”

Fair enough, Clint supposed.

“Well, I don’t want to either, so it works out. But you just met Phil, Barney. What’ve you got against him already?”

“Nothing! He seems like a stand-up guy. Smart. Put together. I’m guessing he’s one hell of a spy.”

“He is,” Clint interjected. “Best I’ve ever known. Well— aside from Nat. Er. The Black Widow. Aside from her.”

That earned him an eyeroll.

“Naturally,” he said. “And of course you call the Black Widow ‘Nat.’”

“So does Phil. Well— he calls her ‘Natasha,’ mostly.”

“Yeah, he seems like your type all right— classy and deadly,” Barney laughed. There was something tentative behind it, though, that didn’t sit well with Clint.

“Classy and deadly… but?” he prompted. May as well get it out in the open.

Barney grimaced, and sat forward on the couch, like reaching out to Clint could take some of the sting out of whatever it was.

“I just heard… well, I heard a *lot* . He’s got a hell of a reputation for, er, extra-curricular activities at conferences and whatnot. And it’s not a reputation as being the long-term commitment type. Hell, I think he’s slept with at least a third of my team at the FBI.”

Clint bit back the urge to ask Barney just how big his team *was* .

“Yeah, no, that’s… fair,” he admitted. “But I knew that going in, Barn. Phil didn’t exactly hide the size of his little black book.”

Or any of his *other* relationship-oriented issues, not that Clint was about to volunteer all Phil’s Brontes to Barney. Phil’s Brontes were for Clint *only.* Well— and maybe Andrew Garner during therapy hours.

“That’s… good,” Barney said, half wary and half defiant, “but it begs the question: what makes you so damn special?”

“ *Nice* ,” Clint snapped, barely resisting the urge to punch him— partly just because Barney was braced like he’d expected it. And partly because, if he was honest, he knew that half of

SHIELD was asking the same thing. Still: “glad my own brother has such a high opinion of me.”

“Oh come off it, Clint. You know what I mean. Guy like that, history like his? Why do you expect him to settle down with you?”

Clint licked his lips, trying to buy time while he cooled off and decided how he wanted to answer the question. In the end, he went with flat honest.

“Because Phil told me so,” Clint said, “and I’ve never once seen him lie about his capacity, in the field or out of it. Look— it surprised me, too. Think he surprised himself as well, to be honest. You could ask him, if you’re really that worried.”

“I could,” Barney admitted, his voice gentling down to match Clint’s, his face going from wary to thoughtful. “Maybe I will. But I wanna hear what *you* think. It’s your heart I worry about, Clint. I don’t give a shit about his.”

It was funny, how Barney always managed to make Clint want to deck him and hug him at the same time. Had since as far back as Clint could remember— and oftentimes Clint *had* decked him, since even back then Barney’d thought hugging was gross. He paused a moment, staring past Barney at the window behind him, the blinds closed against the damp dark outside.

“He got to know me first,” Clint said at last, the words coming slow off his tongue. “Before we slept together, I mean. Kind of the opposite of his usual MO. And we just kinda... clicked. Even then, I don’t know if he’d ever have done anything, except for Driftless. We just… we realized we live together well. We *fit* together well— *outside of bed,* I mean.” Clint clarified as Barney made a noise somewhere between a grunt and a laugh. “Okay, okay, inside of bed *too* . Just… I don’t think that’s something he really ever had before.”

“Was he looking for it?” Barney asked. His voice was measured, kind and patient but not *involved* really. Must be how he sounded at work. Clint deliberately kept looking past him, at the blinds. He wasn’t sure he wouldn’t clam up completely otherwise.

“No,” he laughed, thinking about Phil’s frozen, panicked, stammering shock on realizing he was in love with Clint. Well— it was funny *now* , anyway. “No, he definitely was *not.* But he also wasn’t dumb enough to throw it away now he’s got it. Me.”

“ You think?”

Clint turned to snap at Barney. *Yeah* he thought. *Yeah* Phil loved him— only to have the words die in his throat. Not because they weren’t true. Not because he didn’t *want* to tell people— or because Phil would care, because Phil had said the L-word in front of Director Fury by now, Clint was pretty sure.

But this was *Barney* and Clint… Clint couldn’t actually remember the last time they’d used the word *love* around each other. Definitely not since their parents had died. Maybe not before, either. Love hadn’t ever done much for them, not anything you could count on anyways. Clint’d kept on loving people more in spite of than because of, like he’d told Phil

back in Driftless. And Phil'd gathered up his bacon and his nerve and tried to start a relationship with Clint not *just* because of love… which maybe that was his answer, right there.

"Barn," he sighed, "I don't think either of us know if it's gonna work out long term, okay? We're taking it one day at a time— and yeah, I know, we moved in together. But that was partly logistics, not relationship. No guarantees *I'm* gonna want to stay with him, either." (Though Clint was pretty certain Barney knew just how thin *that* declaration was.) "This is pretty damn good for us both, and we wanna see where it goes. But I'm not worried. I know Phil; when he decides he wants something, it *happens* . And so far, every day he's decided to stay with me— and I've decided to stay with him. Anyway, we're just partners, it's not like we're planning on getting hitched."

"That's forbearing of you," Barney said dryly. But when Clint finally, *finally* looked back at his face, it seemed to have softened up some. "When did you get semi-smart about love, little brother?"

Yeah, it was just weird when Barney said it.

"I'm not," Clint told him gruffly. "You just make me look like a genius in comparison. Barn, I'm fine. He's fine. You'll see."

Or he wouldn't. Probably he'd just disappear on Clint again once he walked out the door, show up again years later.

Sure enough, Barney stood up, slapping his knees in an unmistakable *well, time's a wastin'* gesture.

"It's getting late, Clint. I better get going."

Clint nodded— and then something in him broke and he reached out to squeeze the stuffing out of Barney again. Barney wheezed like a wounded balloon, and Clint took extra satisfaction in pounding his back.

"Yeah, alright," he said finally, bowing to the inevitable.

Phil, as if summoned (or eavesdropping), finally appeared at the end of the hall.

"Good to meet you," he said in his best networking voice, nodding at Barney.

"Likewise," Barney said back as he went to retrieve his coat.

"Hope your guy in Driftless is okay," Clint added, trying his best to dredge up his normal-person voice and put on a Trustworthy Adult face. He'd clung more than enough for one night.

"Yeah, thanks," Barney said, pausing in the middle of putting on his coat and just staring at Clint, his face blank. After a minute— a really weird, awkward minute— he drew a decisive sort of breath and shrugged his coat all the way on.

Then he stepped forward, and threw his arms around Clint for a rough hug.

Clint was too busy being boggled to really realize what had happened till Barney'd already stepped back. And then immediately went from relief at being let go of to wanting it to happen again so he could really pay *attention* this time.

"So… see you 'round?" he asked instead, trying not to croak.

"See you 'round," Barney confirmed— which was the most he ever promised. He turned and held out his hand for Phil to shake.

Phil thrust a tupperware into it.

"You'll want to reheat that on high," he told Barney. "You can bring the container back next time you're over."

"Next time?" Barney asked, staring down at the leftover millet bake in his hands. Clint looked from him to Phil and back. Phil was blander than bland, calm and inviting like he'd turned into a Stepford Wife or some shit.

"Or whenever you're done with it," Phil told Barney firmly. "There'll be plenty of opportunities. You have Clint's phone number, I think-- mine is on the post-it there. See you soon?"

"Um," Barney said, looking over to Clint like he needed a cultural consultant to translate for him. Clint tried to make his face as welcoming as possible, even though he kind of thought his heart had stopped beating.

"Um," Barney said again, still looking at him, "yeah. See you soon."

And he walked through the door.

"Well," Clint said as he walked into their bedroom, "That isn't exactly how I'd planned to spend tonight."

Phil didn't respond immediately, too caught up in his own undershirt, which he was in the process of dragging over his head. Clint watched it as it went, getting a good view of what exactly he *had* been planning to do that night. It was a *really* distracting view, from the swooning curve of Phil's lower back all the way up to the dusting of freckles over his broad shoulders. And it was *all his* now-- too bad for everyone at NSPBPIAC.

"I agree," Phil said when he was finally free. He paused, turning to pull back the covers and flashing his biceps wantonly at Clint for a moment. Clint narrowed his eyes, and was on the verge of deciding that they could *totally* still make his plans for the night work, when Phil started talking again, and torpedoed his rising libido. "The last thing I expected tonight was to be accused by your long-lost brother of cheating on you with two furries."

"Glrk," Clint said, and then "hnagh," and finally "uh?"

And then he shook his head and tried to un-swallow his tongue.

Phil sat on the bed and smirked at him, like he hadn't just nearly killed Clint.

"I'm sorry, he what?" Clint asked weakly as he finally got himself sorted out. "Where was I when this happened?"

"Not home yet. Speaking of," Phil paused, then patted the space beside him on the bed, "I enjoy looking at you from here, but this bed is cold and you are—"

"Probably overdressed," Clint grinned at him, taking the hint and stripping off his shirt.

Phil waited until Clint had looked down to remove his pants, then said:

"I guess my reputation precedes me."

It took Clint a moment to realize he wasn't talking about his reputation for liking Clint naked, and honestly it was only the hint of fragility in his voice that did it.

"Yeah, Barney brought that up with me too," he confessed as he flopped onto the bed and cuddled up to Phil. "Can't say as I was seriously worried."

"Oh good," Phil murmured. He dropped his head against Clint's and heaved a sigh big enough to have come up from his toes. Clint felt the remaining tension in his body drop away.

"Anyway," Clint continued, "I know *exactly* where you were that evening and I have the cell phone logs to prove it."

"Hmm, yeah you do." Phil's voice had gone gruff and reminiscent. "You tell Barney that?"

"Maybe," Clint laughed at him. "If I had, he'd've deserved it."

"He was just looking out for you— I thought, anyway."

Phil sounded hesitant enough that Clint pulled away until he could look him in the eyes. He looked like he was bulging with unspoken… somethings. One of these days, Clint hoped, he'd be able to read Phil's face well enough to know.

"Yeah, Barney does that," Clint sighed, looking down at Phil's knees so he'd stop overthinking his face. "Drives me up a wall. I mean, *seriously* — he walks back into my life after how long and that's all he's got to say to me?"

Phil shifted, his arm tightening around Clint's shoulders.

"I… don't know what to tell you. That sucks? I'm sorry, Clint, I just don't have a frame of reference for brothers, I guess."

Or for *family* , really. No sibs, no cousins, no close living relatives at all all, no one who'd known him before he was grown. No one who always seemed to see the snot-nosed kid *first* ,

instead of the adult he'd grown into. Clint leaned over and laid a gentle kiss on his chest, nestled right into the soft, warm hair there.

"I wasn't sure…. Before you came home, I wasn't sure how welcome he'd be. He seemed defensive. But the way you said hi, I thought…."

Tell me where my analysis fell down , Phil was really saying. Clint shook his head.

"Well yeah I was happy to see him, he's my *brother* . I always want to— look. I love him and all, it's just… it's weird sometimes, okay? I don't know how to… it's just *weird* ."

"Okay," Phil said placidly, as if that was all he needed to satisfy him.

It didn't take a mind reader to know that was a goddamn lie. That was his Coulson-voice, not his Phil-voice. Even if Clint hadn't been well-damn familiar with it, the silence after would have spoken volumes.

"Phil?" Clint said, looking back up at him. He was gnawing on his lip again. "Talk to me, baby. Or should I get Andrew on the line?"

"Should I not have invited Barney back?" Phil asked, soft and worried. "I thought… I was just thinking that he was your *family* , that we should— that you should— I shouldn't have overstepped. I'm sorry."

He sounded so miserable by the end that Clint nearly tumbled over himself getting out his "No!"

"No—" he continued after a moment. "You were fine. It was sweet."

"But weird," Phil prompted.

Clint heaved out a sigh, and turned his face back into the comfort of Phil's fur before trying to explain.

"It wasn't weird. Me and Barn, we're weird. Look, we just… we mostly just had each other growing up. Even before our parents died, Barney had to take care of me *and* him. You know? He was the one who got us *out* , he was the one who decided we should run off to the circus. He was the one who took care of me there. When we, uh, split?"

Clint had to pause, there, remembering the night— the look on Barney's face, fear and disgust and just… just *loss*... all smooshed up together. He swallowed it back, and kept going.

"I didn't think either of us'd ever want to speak to each other again."

Phil's hand started sweeping up and down Clint's arm, slow and soothing.

"But you did."

“Yeah,” Clint admitted. “Yeah, we did. He went looking for me just before he went into the FBI. I guess to warn me? I dunno. We talked some shit out then, about the circus. About… everything. Mom and Dad. I was a merc then so it’s not like I was really someone he’d want to take home to meet his work buddies, but I thought… for a little there, it felt like we were brothers again. But he didn’t seem to want to stay long. And I guess I figured… I figured maybe I’d just worn him out, you know? And with the FBI and then going undercover— so I basically got in the habit of waiting for him to contact me.”

“And then he contacts you and is all hurt that you failed to tell him you were married,” Phil said, something wry twisting in his voice. “Or…” He gestured between the two of them. “You know— little insignificant life changes like that.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Clint laughed. “Hardly worth mentioning. Fine, I guess I can get where he might be a bit miffed. Don’t get me wrong— we *did* talk some. Tried to do Christmas once, even. Thanksgiving. Boy *that* was a mistake. The canned turkey alone was— anyway. I’m always glad to *see* him, Phil. I just don’t know how to… be what he needs, I guess.”

Or how to make him stay.

There was silence for a little, just Phil stroking up and down, up and down Clint’s arm, the two of them breathing in sync.

Then, carefully, Phil said

“Do you think maybe he feels the same?”

Clint opened his mouth to say no, to say Barney’d always known what to do with Clint. Always had a plan, always been so sure he could make life work for both of them… and then for some reason Cassie popped into his head. Maybe it was because she always seemed to be trying to save him and Phil in Driftless, that same *I can fix this* grin on her face as Barney’d always had.

She was *so young* . It was almost painful how young she was, how uncertain underneath that big grin. All of them were young: Quentin, Cassie, poor lost Ellen.

And Barney— Barney hadn’t even been as old as Cassie, when he and Clint had split so brutally. When he’d dragged them off to the circus, he’d been in *middle school* . No way he’d known how to be what a fucked-up kid like Clint had needed back then; he’d just been a fucked-up kid himself.

They weren’t kids anymore, sure, but showing up at Clint’s door ranting wasn’t maybe the sign of a Barney who knew what he was doing. Barney’d always gotten mad to keep from being hurt. Or scared.

“Maybe,” Clint allowed. Maybe he *was* just as messed up as Clint about things still.

“Do you want us to invite him back?” Phil’s voice was measured, his eyes kind. Like there was no wrong answer to the question.

Clint wished there *were* an obvious wrong answer so he could stop gnawing at it. Part of him wanted to just leave it— hadn't he done enough painful personal growth already this year? Shit was exhausting.

Another part of him, the part that felt suspiciously like the boy he'd been when he left the circus, was still incredulous that he'd had his brother in his arms and at his dinner table. *His brother* . His *family* . Surely that was something he and Barney could build on? Especially with Phil here, to back him up if shit went bad?

Phil, who was still holding his hand, still being all patient and conspicuously, flagrantly, almost suspiciously non-pressure-y about it. Phil, who didn't *have* a family left. Not a blood family anyway. Was that a thing Phil maybe wanted?

"Well, he seemed to like the millet bake," Clint sighed, finally finding his voice. "I guess he can come back."

Phil grinned, and a knot untied itself in Clint's heart. There wasn't much, he decided, that he wouldn't give Phil to see him look like that.

"He was certainly entertaining, anyway," Phil said, leaning back against the pillows, like maybe that was it and it was time for them to settle in to sleep. But then he paused, frowning a little. "Do you… would it be easier if I wasn't around when you guys meet?"

"What?" Clint slewed around to stare at him head on. He didn't *seem* offended, anyway. "No! God no— why would you think that?"

He got a shrug for an answer, and Phil looking down at his comforter-covered knees instead of at Clint.

"Barney… seemed surprised you'd talked about him to me."

"Well, yeah, he was undercover. Or I thought he was. Op sec, you know."

"No, I mean, that you'd talked about him *at all* , as in… as a kid. I wasn't sure… if it'd be easier for you two to reconnect without worrying about what I might overhear."

"Oh." Clint considered. "No, it's not… well I dunno, maybe it *is* with Barney. *I* trust you, Phil. But I could see where there's maybe a lot he's kinda sensitive about."

"He asked me if you'd ever talked about Trickshot."

Clint didn't hide his wince nearly fast enough; Phil whipped his head up.

"I'm not mad that you haven't," he said earnestly. "And I'm more than fine staying late at the office, if it's easier to have me out of the house when Barney's over. Clint, I don't want you to feel like you *have* to tell me anything— it's not… it's not a game or a trap or whatever. Okay?"

"I know it's not," Clint told him.

It *had* been with Bobbi sometimes, though she never meant it to be. And it wasn't like Phil wasn't full of traps he didn't even know he'd set. But this wasn't one of them. He looked down at his own hands and sighed, letting the last hopes for welcome back sex fade away. Phil'd never insist on knowing, but….

"I want to tell you," Clint said, grabbing at both Phil's hands, concentrating on how warm, smooth, certain they were within his. "Not just because of Barney, either. You *should* know, Phil. At least a little. I want you to know."

"Then I want to listen," Phil said solemnly.

Clint leaned over to give him a kiss— or take reassurance, one of the two. Breathed in long, with the taste of Phil still lingering on his lips.

"You gotta understand about the circus," he started. And didn't stop until his voice had gone scratchy and the hours had tumbled past midnight into a new day.

Chapter 3: June 2009, Driftless

Chapter Summary

Phil, Phyl, a Ph.D. defense committee, friends, and family.

Chapter Notes

Any inaccuracies in Ph.D. defense proceedings are all my own, probably for the Drama.

The door creaked alarmingly as Barney slipped in, despite his best attempts at stealth. He winced in apology at the people who turned at the sound and started creeping down the stairs, looking for an open seat. Of course, everything in the back or on the aisle was filled and, like anyone else who had ever attempted to sneak into a lecture late, he was forced to apologize his way across a row of people, knocking knees and tripping over bags, until he found a place to sit. And then he had to wedge himself *into* the seat, nearly kneecapping himself on the folded-away desktop as he did. Well, at least no-one was likely to identify him as an FBI agent, the way he was bumbling around.

How the hell had Clint managed to fit his own brawny ass into one of these things, anyway?

Barney glanced around, looking for Clint. There were an *improbable* number of people in the audience, even for a tiny lecture hall like this one, which couldn't seat more than forty or fifty people. He finally spotted his brother's sandy hair midway down, sticking up between a shorter head of dark curls and a steel-gray bun, attached to a set of shoulders covered in a hand-knit shawl. Barney reflected briefly that he wouldn't have exactly expected Clint to have civilian companions— then stopped and reflected again; this was a university shindig, and he didn't even know if Clint and Phil were using their real names for it.

Barney folded his hands in his lap, straightened his jacket, glanced around, and tried to imitate his neighbor— a young caucasian woman with red hair and a composed look on her face. Barney smiled vaguely at her as she turned her head, then faced front and tried to look like he knew what he was in for.

Down front, Phil finished wrestling with the PowerPoint and looked up and around the assembled crowd. Tipped the podium microphone towards him.

Said "hello, everyone."

Or tried to. The only way Barney knew that was what he meant was the ASL interpreter signed it.

“Sorry,” Phil rasped, leaning very close to the microphone. “Laryngitis.”

“No it’s not,” the woman next to Barney muttered, “he lost his voice screaming over a crowd of Juggalos on our last mission.”

“ *Juggalos* ?” Barney hissed, sure he hadn’t heard her right.

“Juggalos,” the woman confirmed, as if it happened to her every day.

Who knew-- maybe at SHIELD, it did.

“You’re Clint’s brother,” the woman said in that same tone.

“And you’re Natasha,” Barney replied, because at this point it was *pretty damn obvious* he was sitting next to his brother’s best friend, the third member of his team along with Phil. He’d heard a *lot* about her, during dinner-table talk at their place. Enough that he’d almost forgotten that Clint’s Nat was also the notorious Black Widow, and that he ought to be shit-scared of the fact that she was well within stabbing range of him.

Almost being the key word here.

“All right, let’s try this again,” Phil said from the front, having accepted a cough drop and adjusted the microphone to his satisfaction. He was still raspy, but understandable. “Good afternoon, everyone. Thank you for being here; and thank you especially to the members of my defense committee for their time today. I’m Phil Coulson”— which settled the question of whether he’d given up on his tattered alias— “and I’ll be presenting my thesis on the post-war career of Margaret Carter, the first Director of SHIELD.”

He flipped away from the first slide, which was a picture of Peggy Carter in late 1949, and to a table of chapter titles.

Barney snorted.

“How the hell’s he going to present on Chapter Four?” he muttered at the Black— at Natasha.

“Very, very carefully,” she returned, then deliberately turned back to watch Phil talk.

Barney tried to pay attention, he really did. The subject was interesting and Phil was one of those rare ducks who actually knew how to give a presentation without droning on or sounding like a half-desperate cruise director. Unfortunately, his voice never fully moved out of rasping territory and Barney just couldn't concentrate. Down in front, Clint was leaning forward, rapt— the ASL interpreter was probably helping. He chuckled at all Phil’s deadpan jokes— once in *front* of the joke, even, like he knew Phil’d put it there. Actually-- he probably did. Once or twice he leaned towards his neighbors, or down in front, to exchange some kind of joking comment.

He'd… never really seen his kid brother like this as an adult. Clint was open and comfortable in a way he never quite managed at their dinners together. It was a different view of Phil, too — he still modulated between being the perfect host and acting like he had at the conference Barney'd seen him at: genial, genuine, and *closed* . Here let a little more mess creep out around the edges, a little more enthusiasm lighten his face.

Clint had been nearly as wound up as Phil had in the few weeks leading up to the thesis defense, and now Barney saw why: it was clearly a work of passion, not a side-project for SHIELD. And Clint had taken an active interest in it, either for Phil's sake or because of the topic itself.

That was why Barney'd moved up his check-in with his guy in Driftless, then taken a day of vacation-- something that meant so much to his brother and his… brother's partner-- seemed like the kind of thing a guy should be at. Now though, he wondered if maybe he was wrong.

This afternoon, despite the formality of the event, was clearly for their friends.

Which Barney… wasn't. Apparently.

Sure, Clint had told him when it was, but maybe that hadn't been an invitation so much as a reminder they'd be out of town.

Barney glanced over at the Black Widow quickly, sizing her up. She seemed pretty intent on Phil's presentation, too— perhaps she wouldn't notice if he skedaddled.

He shifted a little in the seat.

"Those translations of the Leviathan documentation were a bear," she said, leaning over to whisper to Barney suddenly. "Phil gave them to me to work on while Clint was in the hospital here. Gave us both something to do while we waited for him to wake up. I don't think they'd ever been looked at before. I'm glad he got permission to use them without redactions."

"I'm sorry, what?" Barney asked, feeling his stomach drop.

"They were in a fairly idiomatic Russian, *and* encrypted," the Widow said, as if she didn't know what he was *really* asking. "But that turned out to be a predecessor of a cipher the Red Room used, so between us we were able to get them sorted out."

"While Clint was in the hospital here," Barney returned flatly.

"In a coma,after falling off a dam. It's a long story. You can ask him after." She turned back to the presentation, clearly done with the conversation.

In a hospital, in a coma, which was *not* in contact with his next-of-kin apparently.

"I'll… do that," Barney said, trying to keep the sudden spike of anger out of his voice and fearing he'd only flattened it down to miserable.

Welcome or not, he decided, he had *things to ask* Clint. Who also clearly needed to be reminded that, however distant, he did *have a brother.*

"Well that went well, I thought," Elena Magnos said as she shook Clint's hand. "I really liked that he touched on how much Director Carter's reluctance to work with the other alphabet agencies was probably influenced by the misogyny she experienced within the SSR."

"He worked a *lot* with Phyl on that," Clint told her, huffing it all out on a relieved breath. "He'll be real glad to hear it worked for you. You really think it went well?"

"You don't?" Magnos raised an eyebrow.

"I always think Phil does well; I'm biased." Clint stuffed his hands in his pockets so she wouldn't see them shaking, and looked around nervously. "It was a big crowd, too. Kind of shocked."

Both Magnos and Cassie, who hadn't left his side since she'd appeared in his and Phil's hotel room earlier that day with a sack of breakfast pastries and a nervous grin, snorted at that one.

"It's an interesting subject," Magnos said diplomatically.

"And it's the guy who blew up Forkenbrock," Cassie added, not at *all* diplomatically. She was grinning as she said it, though.

"Technically that was Bent," Clint told her.

"Oh please, everyone knows that's a cover story and it was really the government," Cassie scoffed. "I'd've thought SHIELD would've been more subtle than that."

"You'd think," Clint replied neutrally, as if taking the heat off Bent had not been exactly what Phil and Nat had been trying to do.

"Anyway, if you didn't want people rubber-necking Phil's presentation, you should have stuck to your covers. Or else transferred Phil back to wherever he was before."

"American. And nah— cover wasn't gonna hold up any longer. Though, for a while there I thought us just changing our legal names to Ford and Moore was gonna be easier than dealing with Admissions. I'm kinda surprised we didn't get banned from campus, though. Phil's thesis advisor pulled some strings, I guess."

"Omg, Dr. Drake? Is he here?" Cassie looked around eagerly. "Hudson used to talk about him sometimes like he was this legendary mythical creature who only came in for naps, like, at Homecoming and faculty meetings."

Then she drooped a little, no doubt remembering what had happened to Hudson in the end. Clint rubbed her shoulder.

“Haven’t seen him. At this point, I think he’s just a convenient figment of Phyl’s imagination so she can have free reign over the History Department. I really hope you’re wrong, though, and *some* people are here because they’re interested in Peggy Carter, not whatever spy stuff they think Phil is up to now.”

“Yeah, you keep telling yourself that,” Cassie laughed at him. “Does it matter? Phil’s a draw. I know I kept getting distracted wondering just how many of your spy friends are here, like incognito.”

“Not many, sorry to disappoint. Jasper, for sure— that’s the bald guy over there talking with Jeffrey and Phyl. And Nat’s around, but you met her already. But honestly, no one else was that interested. Well— Melinda and Andrew might have come, but their schedules didn’t really allow. And Nick, but his schedule *really* didn’t allow.”

Director Fury had strongly considered trying, actually, but the look on Phil’s face when he’d mentioned it had stopped him.

“Wouldn’t be fair to get Coulson all worried about security while he’s trying to present,” he’d told Clint privately. Clint had agreed. It was bad enough Jasper was here, and Phil had to try not to twist himself into the emotional pretzel he usually turned into around Jasper. Keeping up a friendship when one of you was deep cover for Hydra seemed exhausting.

“Too bad; I really wanna meet him sometime,” Cassie said, looking perky. “Did I ever tell you I did a presentation on him in high school?”

Clint boggled at her, and dimly noted Elena choking next to him.

“I— no? You. What?”

“Yep! For our urban youth leadership society. I was maybe a bit of a brat in high school. But I *do* think he’d be cool to meet.”

“Oh lord,” Elena sighed, as if already seeing visions of doom. Clint privately agreed with her.

“ *Any* way,” Cassie rolled on, “if you don’t have any other spy friends here, who’s that guy with Agent Car— um, with Natasha? You can’t tell me *he’s* not a spook. Just look at his *suit* .”

“You can’t actually tell a good government agent by their suit, Cassie,” Clint said, starting to turn anyway. “At least, not unless they want you to— oh my *God, Barney* ?”

It really was Barney, wearing a suit that screamed “slumming G-man” so loudly it had to be intentional. He was chatting with Natasha like he didn’t have a care in the world.

“Hah, called it. Another spy! Don’t tell me I’m not good, Clint,” Cassie crowed.

“I won’t,” Clint told her, already moving. “But you’re also wrong. He’s my brother.”

Cassie made a noise like a startled guinea pig, but Clint wasn’t paying much attention by then. Barney’d noticed him coming and his face had gone all kind of twisty-weird, like he

wasn't sure if he felt embarrassed or pissed off. Standard Barton reunion then, Clint thought, and ignored it. Better to just pretend they had a normal relationship, like Phil often did. He had to admit it'd kind of worked, over the last year and a half. Certainly, Barney'd *kept on coming back*— he'd even been the one to suggest meeting up a couple-few times.

Things were slowly getting better, but still: without Phil, Clint and Barney circled each other like two tortoises that'd been stranded on different islands for a few decades. So maybe this was another awkward turtle attempt at bonding? If so, Clint would probably err on the side of open enthusiasm.

"Barney, what the hell! I didn't know you were coming— I would've saved a seat," Clint said, reaching out to pull his brother in for a back-slappy sort of embrace.

There. Nailed it.

Barney let himself be hugged, and Clint thought some of the tension in his shoulders faded with the contact.

"Wasn't sure I could get away," Barney told him, "had to call in a couple favors to cover. Made it kind of a work trip."

"You didn't have to do that."

That came out a bit more vehemently than Clint had intended. It'd just occurred to him there were plenty of good reasons Barney *shouldn't* be seen with two SHIELD agents in Driftless. Or rather one big reason, who sold chutney at the farmer's market downtown.

"Shut up Clint," Cassie said next to him, and Barney laughed.

"Yeah, shut up, Clint," he repeated. "You and Phil worked damn hard on this; figured I should be here after hearing all about the mess with Chapter Eight for months."

"Well all right then," Clint said, trying to keep it casual and knowing he was failing. The gooey warmth that had just ambushed him had to be coming out on his face somehow. He hoped it wasn't too obvious; Barney had never gone for public displays of emotion. Still. *Still.* He'd come. "Glad to have you here."

"Yeah?" Barney said, like it somehow surprised him, and screw public displays, he was getting a goddamn hug and that was that.

"'Course. Of course yeah," Clint told him. Cassie darted a curious look at him, and he realized maybe he'd sounded a bit choked up. "Anyway," he rushed, slapping Barney on the back and trying for manly camaraderie, "let me introduce you 'round while we wait for Phil."

Phyl was waiting for him when he came out of the small classroom, and Phil's shoulders slumped when he saw her.

“Well?” she asked, looking him over.

“Well,” he replied.

Then he shrugged his shoulders, as if it were the rest of the answer she was looking for, and finished slinging his laptop bag over his shoulder.

“ That’s not an answer,” she told him, crossing her arms and standing between him and the freedom of the atrium. “Don’t think I think it is. How did it go?”

“Longest fifteen minutes of my life,” Phil sighed, starting to move, hoping she’d take the hint and let him through.

“I hear that a lot. Can’t say I expected it from you, Senior Agent.”

She was not taking the hint, in fact if anything she was hardening her stance. He glanced behind her— the audience had filtered out of the lecture hall ages ago, while he and the defense committee had left for questioning in a room secure enough for them to bring up the redacted points of his dissertation (including the entirety of Chapter 4).

Phil had been grateful not to have to face the crowd, and had hidden in the bathroom for most of the time between when they’d exiled him so they could debate his fate, and when they’d called him back. In the meantime, most of the faces he didn’t know seemed to have left. Good. He didn’t really want an audience— he hadn’t expected the audience he’d gotten. (Phyl had rolled her eyes when he’d admitted it, and muttered something deprecatory about his skills as an intelligence agent. Which was fair enough.)

Also, he wasn’t sure why he was dragging things out now, why this was so hard to talk about. He’d talked around entire hostile villages. He’d talked around the *World Security Council* . He’d talked Clint Barton into dating him. He’d talked himself into dating Clint Barton. He’d talked Clint and his brother into maintaining contact. He was *good* at talking, it was his thing. This shouldn’t be hard. But his lips remained stubbornly glued shut.

Apparently some things just cut too dear. Maybe he needed to talk to Andrew about that.

“Phil,” Phyl said sternly, “stop stalling and spit it out. How did it go?”

“I survived,” he said, knowing it was only going to prolong the agony.

“Uh huh. Don’t think I can’t read your face, mister. Spill.”

Shit. Right. This was Driftless; not DC. He’d left his agent-face behind. Just when he could have used it most. Phil shook his head and went blank.

Phyl snorted.

“Nice try. Look, Phil, I don’t think that’s gonna work for you for a couple days at least. Just give it up. I can see that darned smile.”

“Then why are you asking?” Phil choked out, as the darned smile overtook all his best efforts to rein it in. It felt wrong on his face; too wide, too… intimate. Too close to the smiles only Clint saw, maybe.

“Because you need practice saying it. Come on.” She came forward finally, taking the laptop bag off his shoulder before patting his cheek.

He had to swallow heavily before he could get the words out, and even then they came out grudgingly— and a little hushed:

“They accepted it.”

Now her other hand joined the first, and she was beaming.

“Congratulations, Doctor Coulson,” she said. “Was that so hard?”

He rolled his eyes at her, even while he *wanted* to say “yes, actually,” because his words had gone again. And that was absurd— he’d had an easier time telling Natasha that Clint was *dead* than this. If triumph was this much harder for him to articulate than tragedy what the hell did that say about him?

“Okay, okay, you’re a mysterious and inscrutable spy, I get it,” Phyl laughed at him. “But you’re also a Doctor of Philosophy in History now, Phil, and you’ve got a lot of family and friends out there waiting to hear it— before your committee comes back out and spoils the surprise. Come on— it’s not the end of the world. And you of all people know that. Let’s go face them.”

Phil felt something seize up in his heart, just a little, at that “family.”

It was probably just a tossed-out term, but it hurt, in the way that it always hurt just a little to be reminded that he had no family left. That the other newly-minted Ph.D.s Phyl might have done this for would have had mothers, fathers, possibly sisters or brothers, spouses and children waiting for them. He had Clint, and that was all in the world.

Phil stuffed that thought down, and let her put her arm through his and tug him along.

Cassie spotted him first, which was a bit of a shock— Clint’s Phil-radar very rarely malfunctioned and Natasha was no slouch either— and tugged on the arms of Elena, who she’d been chatting with. He saw the smile already breaking on Elena’s face as she turned and winked at him. (Or else past him— he could hear the other committee members filing out into the hallway behind him, and Missouri Jones would be among them.) The movement clued Clint in, and he clued in the rest of the group with his happy yelp as he spun to face Phil.

Phil… maybe got a little lost at the look on his face: anxious, proud, intent, utterly focused...

… breaking into pure radiance when Phyl stepped forward and announced to the crowd:

“Let me present Doctor Phillip J. Coulson.”

And then he *obviously* wasn't going to pay attention to much else, not with Clint rushing for him, spinning him around, and greeting him with a smacking kiss.

"You did it, Doctor Moore!"

" *We* did it, Indy," Phil replied, clinging tight to him and burying his own smile in Clint's warm neck. Just for a moment, just to brace himself for the approbation of his friends.

So he could maybe be forgiven for being completely taken aback by the hand that braced him on the shoulder and pulled him away, saying

"Hey, Clint, no hogging the Ph.D."

Because that was—

"Barney?" Phil boggled, and went limp under the assault as Barney Barton *hugged* him.

It was brief and back-slappy, in a kind of manly half-hug way, which was good because Phil didn't think he could have processed anything longer.

"You're— I didn't know you'd be here. When did...?"

"Just before you started presenting," Barney told him, pulling back with a wide smile on his face. Too wide? "You and Clint, jeez. You thought I'd miss this? You talked it up enough."

Definitely a too-wide smile, then. Clint had told Phil he was the better of the two of them at handling Barney, but Phil didn't see how that could be so. He kept misunderstanding, back-tracking, scrambling to make up— kind of like it'd been with Rosie the cat in the early days. And now Barney was going all fluffed-up and growly like she used to, too.

"Well, it was kind of all-consuming to *us,* but I know it's not really that big of a deal," Phil tried. "It's a lot of trouble to go to."

"Ph.D.'s kind of a big deal where I come from," Barton said. He was outright frowning now. "And I don't think Clint'd want to hear you saying it wasn't, either."

"What wouldn't I want?" Clint asked, his uncertain hearing in big crowds choosing just the wrong moment to work right.

"Your man here's trying to tell me his dissertation defense wasn't a big deal," Barney said, throwing Phil completely under the bus.

"I wasn't—" Phil started, trying to forestall Clint's glower. "That is, it's a long way to travel —" now Barney was starting to glower again, which, given that Natasha and Jasper and Elena had all made the trip was probably fair— "I mean." He slumped, finally. "I'm glad to see you, Barney. Thank you for coming."

Barney unprickled as suddenly as a balloon deflating. His answering "yeah, well," and shrug were very nearly shy.

Oh. Had Phil mistaken Barton insecurity for belligerence again? Oops.

“All right,” Phyl interrupted them— or saved them, since Phil’s brain had gone dangerously blank at the idea Barney might have been uncertain of his welcome— “now that you’ve had a chance to greet your family, Phil, you need to go talk to your friends, too. Or you’re going to be late for your reception.”

“His reception?” Clint asked— thankfully, since Phil was still reeling from the casual way she’d included Barney in his family, as if it wasn't even a question.

Barney was *Clint’s* brother, not Phil’s. Clint was… well, they were living together and Phil might still be commitment-shy but even he knew Clint counted as family. But that didn’t mean *Barney* did— or did it? How transitive were the properties of brotherhood, anyway?

“It's in fifteen minutes," Phyl responded to Clint’s question. "We got them to rope off half the patio at the student union. I don’t want the beer to get warm, so let’s get a move on, please."

“All right,” Phil said, finally darting a glance over at Barney— and finding him looking just as boggled as Phil felt, which was slightly vindicating. “Clearly Cassie’s going to vibrate out of this dimension if I don’t go say hi, anyway. Barney, you want to come to dinner with Clint and me after the reception? Just a… just a family thing?”

“I…” and now he’d managed to transfer *all* his speechlessness to Barney, apparently. It made him feel smugger than it should. “I…” finally, Barney seemed to give up on trying to speak, and just nodded.

Phil went off to accept the hugs and congratulations of his friends— from Peter Mahakian, Missouri, and the other defense committee members; Elena and Jeffrey, Cassie and Bent, Natasha and, always with a private little knife-twist in his heart, Jasper-- in good humor.

By the time it came time to leave for the reception, he’d endured so much affection from so many people that it he’d nearly forgotten about Barney’s weird uncertainty.

That is, until Barney took advantage of the muddle that happened when an entire crowed tried to leave out one door at once to pull Phil back.

“So,” he said, his hand warm and perhaps a little too bracing on Phil’s shoulder, “what’s this I hear about Clint was in a coma for three days, Coulson, and *you* were his next of kin?”

“I— ah,” Phil struggled to switch gears. Well, that explained a *lot* about Barney’s attitude.

“Don’t you even try to pull the classified information card,” Barney growled.

It was though , Phil wanted to say. But Barney would already know that, and know that Phil knew that. And know too that it was only half an explanation. Anyway, there was no reason for Phil *not* to be honest with him about this.

“If I’d had any idea how to find you, believe me you’d have been there,” Phil told him. “Those were *not* decisions I wanted to be making.” *Alone, anyway* , he nearly added. Barney’s face lightened again, so Phil must have— miraculously— said the right thing.

The crowd was disappearing down the path now, leaving them still standing in the door, both of them apparently groping for more words. Something, maybe, about how if something happened now he *wouldn’t* have to decide alone— and neither would Barney? A year ago, five months ago— hell, a *day* ago— he would’ve thought that was too heavy a thing to drop onto the balsa wood structure of Clint and Barney’s rebuilding relationship. But maybe he’d have been wrong.

The moment stretched between them, and Phil struggled to find words to address it.

As he was opening his mouth, still uncertain what was going to come out, an elderly caucasian man came through the glass doors. He slid between Phil and Barney with a muttered ope, smelling of tobacco and mildew. He seemed familiar— Phil’d probably seen him at a lecture somewhere. The man paused just inside the door and turned, looking lost.

“They seem to have changed things since I was last here,” he said, which was a mild way of mentioning that the entire western half of Forkenbrock, atrium included, had been rebuilt in the last year. “Do you know where lecture hall two is?”

“Down the hall to the left,” Phil said.

“Oh good. ‘Fraid I’m *terribly* late. Hope I haven’t missed the whole shindig.”

The man sailed off, and Phil, shaken out of his fugue, turned to Barney.

“Come on, we should catch up. I— if you want, we could tell you more about it at dinner? I think mostly Clint and I just don’t talk about it.”

“Yeah I bet it’s kind of a downer,” Barney laughed— a small one, but real. “I’d… I’d like it. If that’s okay.”

Phil assured him it was— and really, truly, meant it,, to his own shock. He *wanted* Barney to know, to share that pain with him.

They left the building together. Halfway down the path Phil stopped, realization dawning.

Of course the eldrrly man had looked familiar. And was probably long gone, so he had no way of confirming, but—

“Doctor *Drake* ?”

Chapter 4: August 2009, Washington DC

Chapter Summary

Phil shows up at Barney's door with a little surprise.

Chapter Notes

content warning for body mutilation. Event not described, description of wound moderately graphic.

Barney scrutinized the interior of the refrigerator with a sharp eye, as if maybe it'd somehow developed edible food since the last time he'd looked in it five minutes ago. No such luck. It was still full of maybe-expired condiments and fairly fresh beer, plus the remains of several take-out containers.

He could've sworn he still had leftover chili from the last time he'd been over to Clint's but no— no, now that he recalled, he'd eaten that a couple-few nights ago, as an ill-advised two AM snack. He had to stop that.

Sighing, he grabbed a Stouffer's out of the freezer and decanted it from its box straight into the microwave. Apparently it was going to be a turkey tetrazzini kind of night. As he waited for it to cook, he found and gnawed a three-day old semi-stale breadstick.

Apparently it'd been longer than he thought since he'd had a chance to get to the store-- or even *home* to cook. Covering for Special Agent Payne, off on maternity leave, as well as his own section, had been a lot more work than he'd thought it would be. Seriously, if that stupid university teaching lab daycare spot didn't open up soon so Payne could come back, Barney was going to hire them a nanny his own damn self. How hard could it be to find one in DC that worked even— he cut the thought off abruptly as his doorbell buzzed.

And kept on buzzing, like someone was leaning on it. Hard.

Frowning absently and still gnawing on the breadstick, Barney went to the door.

Whoever it was, was staying out of the peephole's sightlines. Huh.

Barney opened the door with one hand, using the other to remove his gun from its spot in the drawer of his hall table. He did not bother to spit out the breadstick.

The man standing— slumping, really, which explained the peephole thing— on the other side of the door was covered in soot. Dried blood that had smeared from the scratches covering his face. He was also cradling his left arm with his right— well, what was visible of his left arm, under multiple swaddles of torn suit coat. Underneath the blood, he *looked* vaguely Caucasian and maybe middle-aged.

"Hi," said the guy, in Phil Coulson's voice. Then he fell forward right into Barney's arms.

Barney was so startled, he dropped the breadstick right on Phil's head.

Phil managed to hang on to consciousness— by a thread— while Barney got him in the door and onto the couch, where he could start cataloging injuries.

"'S my arm… mostly," Phil slurred, blinking up at him. "Prob'ly oughtta see a doctor or somethin."

Having identified no life-threatening holes in Phil's vital bits, Barney moved on to his arm as directed— and stopped cold.

"Is that a tourniquet?" he yelped.

It absolutely was— he didn't need Phil's weak *yeah* to know it. One of Phil's ties had been wound tightly around his arm just below the elbow. Below that was… was a mess. Barney glanced at it just long enough to confirm the tourniquet was doing its work, then gently wrapped Phil's coat back around it.

"I'm going to call an ambulance, Phil."

"No!" Phil shouted, and then wheezed, subsiding into coughing.

While he was recovering, Barney sat back and assessed the situation. It was just *like* Phil, he decided, to be paranoid. SHIELD had always trained 'em that way. Damned spooks. He must be worried someone was monitoring the police scanners. And… and he hadn't just called SHIELD, or suggested Barney do so.

Now that… that was a bit worrisome.

"Where did this happen?" he asked Phil quietly, trying to move himself into asset-handling mode.

"Home," Phil sighed, looking like he wanted to sink into the couch and disappear. As Barney's blood ran cold, he continued. "He came through the front window. Rosie-- the cat-- she…. We scattered."
"Clint?" Barney asked, through a throat gone suddenly tight.

"Got out," Phil told him. "Tried to decoy him away from Clint— back yard. Nearly made it, but…" Pursed lips, a kind of drunken head shake. Barely holding it together. Whatever the

fuck was going on, Barney couldn't afford not to get Phil medical help, and soon. "Blew the garage up on me," Phil finished.

"That when your hand got hurt?"

Phil nodded.

"And Clint is… okay, you said?"

Barney tried to keep the name steady on his tongue. Asking about an asset, not a brother.

"Hope so." Phil also seemed to be in mission mode, somewhere beneath the pain. Clint'd told Barney what Agent Coulson was like on a mission. Sure and certain and slick as fucking teflon. He didn't look sure or certain now, and the nonstick had definitely scratched— but he was clearly *trying* to be unaffected.

"You want a doctor, but not an ambulance," Barney said slowly. "Even though your arm's half off. So… what's wrong at SHIELD? Phil?" he prompted, when Phil only looked grim. "Are… did you go rogue or something?"

It was… not impossible. Phil'd been close to Director Fury, and Director Fury'd been assassinated last week. Well— *officially* he'd died in a home invasion, but honestly SHIELD should've just not tried, if that was the best they could come up with. The entire intelligence community had been waiting for the other shoe to drop. Looked like this was it.

Phil managed a laugh, between fits of coughing.

"Depends on who you ask."

Phil's gaze had turned reptilian, remote. When they'd first met, Barney would've said Phil was mostly harmless: a spook for sure, but one of those analyst types. A little dry, despite the furries. Definitely a good guy. Mostly, to be honest, he'd been afraid Phil was a little too normal for his brother. Wouldn't get the chaos that came embedded in the Barton DNA. Seeing Phil now, still sharp despite the exhaustion, pain, and blood loss, clearly still trying to decide whether to keep on lying, Barney realized exactly what Clint must've seen in him.

"Look, I'll help you either way," Barney told him. "For… for Clint's sake. But I can't help you right if I don't know."

For Clint's sake. Phil'd know how much that hurt him to say. After a lifetime of saying nothing much about their childhood even to Barney, who'd been right fucking beside him, Clint had dumped all his shit on Phil.

Phil was probably the only person alive outside of the Barton brothers themselves who knew exactly how Barney had fucked up. He knew about Clint getting shot, getting beat. Knew that Barney had… not been there. Hadn't known it was *Clint* Trickshot had left for dead until about two towns too late. Knew, too, that Barney hadn't gone back— no, he'd left Clint to the hospital and the system. And, yeah, Phil also knew Barney had turned state's evidence on Trick. That he'd gone straight, gone to college, gone to *Quantico.*

Phil'd pushed and prodded both Bartons until if they didn't look at it hard they felt like something resembling normal brothers. But Barney knew that was just veneer— it didn't make up for him being weak, back when Clint was still his responsibility. And Phil, Phil knew it all.

He knew-- and he was *here* . Injured, alone, desperate, he'd come to *Barney* .

That had to count for something, right?

Come on, Phil, give me a second chance.

Maybe Phil could read minds, or maybe he just knew Bartons too damn well, because after a pause his eyes… softened. He nodded once, firm, bracing himself, hardening back up, before speaking.

"SHIELD's compromised," he gritted out. "Top to bottom. Hydra— "

"— does *not* exist anymore, even I know that," Barney interrupted him. It wasn't a great interrogation technique, but come *on* . He'd been with Phil— horrified, but with him— right up to the point Nazi scientist weirdo cultists entered the conversation.

"Does too," Phil said truculently. "Known since Driftless. Me'n Clint an' N'tasha… Director had us doing counterintel. Hadda know how deep it went before… well, we ran out of time. Must've found us out— 's why they killed Nick. Then they sent… sent him after us. The Winter Soldier."

"Also does not exist… does he?"

Phil's laugh got weaker.

"Oh yeah. So… came here. Only safe place. They don't know. You. Your network. Doctor?"

Barney just… stared at him for a moment.

There was a huge conspiracy inside SHIELD.

O… kay.

Led by a Nazi cult everyone thought had died. Again: okay.

Phil had been attacked by a mythical assassin. Well, if you bought the revived Nazi cult, how much more unlikely was the assassin?

And Phil had come here, of all places. *That* was the real sticking point, stupid as it was. Barney wasn't sure even *Clint* would have done that.

He felt his throat close up.

"We'll get you to a doctor," he said, forcing the words out.

Phil nodded briefly, his eyes closing again and his face going pale as if Barney's decision was the last thing he'd been holding on for and now he was going to fall apart.

Ugh. No, Barney needed him to keep it together a little longer.

"So, Clint know you're here?" he asked, as he puttered around quickly, grabbing his phone and keys and unearthing his emergency contacts burner.

"No," Phil told him, looking like that hurt worse than his arm. "He went… down the chute. Didn't see… hope he's okay."

Well, great.

"Okay,"

Barney reached over and switched on the tv, then his police scanner, and nestled his remote in Phil's good hand. "That next. I've got to call a couple people, you tell me if you hear anything."

He didn't expect much, just to keep Phil interacting, but nearly immediately Phil said:

"Fuck."

Channel 4 was on, with live chopper coverage of what looked like paramilitary activity or possibly a movie shoot, down under— he couldn't tell exactly what highway, goddamnit.

"That's the Winter Soldier?" he asked Phil, somewhat unnecessarily. The guy was huge, and his left arm was covered in some kind of plate armor or something. He was trying to fend off attacks from a tiny red-haired lady and a much larger blonde woman in SHIELD tac gear. They were surrounded by a larger melee.

"Yeah. And Nat." Now that Phil said it, Barney remembered her from Driftless. The Black Widow. Their friend— their partner. The red-haired lady currently strangling the Winter Soldier with her thighs.

"You think Clint's part of that mess?"

Even as he said it, two arrows buried themselves in the Winter Soldier's butt.

So that answered *that* question.

The Solder staggered, stumbled— then another arrow hit him in the neck and he fell, taking the Black Widow down with him.

Armed personnel surrounded them both.

"Shit," Phil muttered. "Can't tell who."

"I see SHIELD tac gear in the mob?"

“STRIKE teams… heavily infiltrated.”

“Fuck,” Barney spat out. He probably should have guessed— tactical response was where *he* would have concentrated if he’d been planning on suborning the FBI. Not that he would ever do that. Probably. “Okay. Fine. We’re gonna get you to a hospital— quietly— then I’m gonna go see if I have to rescue my brother from his own organization. Okay?”

“Okay,” Phil said, and finally fainted.

As he walked inside the small metal door beneath the dam, prodded by two serious-looking SHIELD agents with semi-automatics, his hands clasped on top of his head, Barney briefly wondered why he’d thought it was a good idea to go straight all those years ago. Surely, a life of crime would have been easier than *this* .

Well… until someone shot you or framed you or flipped on you— or you had to skip town *again* to avoid the shooting or framing or flipping. He never should’ve gone undercover either. Took all the mystique out of the underworld.

“Straight ahead,” said the smaller of the two SHIELD agents, gesturing with her gun. It nearly dwarfed her. Probably a good indication she and her buddy weren’t actually Hydra— they probably had some kind of minimum height requirements. Unless she’d been a quinjet pilot or something…. Even Hydra probably made exceptions for that.

Barney nearly opened his mouth to ask. But she looked grim— and not really in need of having her day brightened by the Barton family suspect sense of humor. Seen close up, the tac gear both she and her tall, equally grim, companion wore was soiled, and their shoulders were low with exhaustion. She turned her head at his sigh, gave him a glare as weighty as any hardened field agent’s, and turned back— but not before Barney thought he caught a glimpse of a sparkly purple clip in her dark hair, just beneath her cap.

Something like regret caught in his throat.

As they passed through the damp, dimly-lit concrete halls, he thought of Clint’s hallucinogenic run through the subterranean landscape under Driftless, the one that had ended in a confrontation on a dam. Clint’s face had gone pale as he’d talked about it, almost puce, in that way Barney recognized too well from his own flashbacks. Was he walking through a version of Clint’s nightmares, right now?

Well.

He already knew the answer to that one.

Barney shook the thought out of his head, and followed meekly behind the agents.

Finally, they reached another low door and the tall blonde agent— who Barney was fairly sure he’d last seen on tv, fighting the Winter Soldier alongside the Black Widow— gestured him inside.

There, at last, was Clint.

He looked like his life had ended and he'd somehow failed to fall over. Worse than Barney had ever seen him-- except for that last night with Trick.

And yet, Barney was shocked at the relief that flooded his heart, seeing Clint alive and upright. He barely noticed the people around Clint— just enough to form a quick impression and find his exits. The Black Widow— Nat— standing in a corner by Deputy Director Maria Hill. There, at the table, a black guy with an eyepatch and a sling, who *would* have been Director Nicholas Fury except that Director Fury was definitely dead. It'd been on TV.

And there his impression ended, as Clint pulled his focus.

"Barney ," he said, voice cracking. "They— I— Jesus, *Barn* ."

He was across the room in a moment, gripping Barney by the shoulders with shaking hands. After the briefest hesitation he pulled Barney into a hug. Barney went with it, because with Clint's breath on his face it had hit home just how nearly Barney had lost him this time.

"Barney," Clint mumbled into his collar, then started to pull back. His voice was choking already. "Barney, Phil is…. Phil. The Winter Soldier, he attacked us. I couldn't. We got separated. We. He— Phil, he— he's dea—"

"Alive," Barney cut him off vehemently, "he's alive."

Although at the moment he kind of wanted to kill Phil. Just a little. Just for insisting this wait. That secrecy was paramount, that they couldn't allow themselves to compromise the remnants of SHIELD. That he didn't want to risk communication until he was stable— and had time to verify his hunch.

How will Clint take that? Barney had asked.

Clint's a professional. He knows how this goes , Phil'd said— though Barney had to admit he hadn't looked happy about it. *Anyway,* Phil had continued, with the air of a guy trying to convince himself, *he knows by now not to assume anyone's dead without seeing a body* .

Except he *clearly hadn't* , and Barney was going to *strangle* Phil. If he could find a way to do that without putting that terrible dead-guy-walking look right back on Clint's face, anyway.

"Alive?" The word was so small, so bewildered, it took Barney a moment to parse it *as* a word and not a whimper. "How— what? No—" Clint shook his head distractedly, like the idea was a gnat that had flown into his ear.

"Yes, alive, I promise," Barney told him. "Clint. Look at me. I promise."

Clint looked at him, and gulped.

"You've seen him?" He snapped, eager, desperate, almost angry. Life was starting to come back to his face in dribs and drabs, as he finally processed Barney's words.

“Collapsed on my doorstep. He’s at the hospital now. Stable. Anonymous. Safe. *Highly* drugged.”

Clint heard all that with growing wonder, till he was practically radiant with relief. When he pulled Barney back in for another hug, his body was shaking this time, but with laughter.

“He is such an *asshole* ,” Clint crowed. “A brilliant fucking asshole. Oh God.”

The laughter turned to sobbing just a little there, Barney thought. He turned so Clint’s face was a little hidden in his shoulder, and scanned the rest of the room. Their reactions had filtered through distantly while he was concentrating on Clint— relieved sighs, a few murmurs, a bitten-off squeal, and Fury’s rumbled, hypocritical, “for fuck’s sake, Cheese.”

They’d been galvanized, he thought, shocked back to life themselves somehow. Every single one of them looked a little taller and a whole lot happier. Maybe Phil Coulson could live after all, if this was the kind of light he lit in his friends’ faces. It was getting a little uncomfortable to watch, actually.

“Hey. Got a message for you,” Barney prompted Clint, even though his shoulder felt cold when Clint pulled off it.

“Yeah?”

Like he was *surprised* or some shit, when even *Barney* knew to expect that Phil Coulson would’ve sent a damn message, even from his death bed. Barney’s face must have said something like that, because Clint grinned again, a little watery. A little transfigured, also, like no time Barney’d seen him before except maybe when he’d seen Barney again for the first time in that Arlington living room. Like… well. Like he’d just gotten his family back. Like Barney’d just been the one to *give* him his family back.

Yeah, maybe Phil could live. Though Deputy Director Hill was still glaring at Barney hard, so if he wanted to keep all this good will maybe he’d better get to talking.

“He says to tell you he knows who the Winter Soldier is,” Barney said— then raised his voice to be heard above the sudden din in the room— “and maybe how to deprogram him.”

Barney kept up what he hoped was a comforting drone as he and Clint drove on up out of DC and into Montgomery County, through Bethesda, Rockville, Gaithersburg. Explained that Germantown was as far as he’d thought he could get Phil without the man coding on him, how he knew a guy, a couple guys, how it was a private hospital, maybe a little out of date yeah, but good. Quiet. How Phil had a private room, a nice view of the woods— kinda, anyway, if you overlooked the ambulance docking bay. How he’d gotten Phil settled in, stayed there while he stabilized, how the tomato soup in the cafeteria was the way to go; the chicken was all noodle and no meat and the vegetable medley was so salty you could pickle shit in it. What Phil had said about the Winter Soldier being Captain America’s pal, which he’d wanted to tell Clint himself before Barney’d pointed out would lose them time. How Barney hadn’t believed him until he’d googled— from a Starbucks all the way up in

Delaware, just in case. How Phil thought they could go about getting hold of former Director Carter without Pierce's Hydra cronies finding them out. What the doctors were telling him about the prognosis for Phil's hand, which was not good, but they hadn't lost hope yet.

Clint heard none of it. He just stared out the windshield with wide, glassy eyes and nodded along. Kinda like he had in the back of the patrol care after their parents had died, the one that'd taken them to the orphanage— just 'till they could find next-of-kin, the officer had said. Clint had turned to stare out the back as they bumped away from their home.

"I promise you, he's fine, he's waiting for you," Barney said as they passed the Germantown city limits. "He'll be back on his feet in no time, and you can go ho— help. Your friends. Kick Hydra in the ass."

"Mn," Clint said, nodding. Still staring.

As they got out of the car, Barney shoved an O's cap on Clint's head and Clint snorted.

"I know, I know, whatever," Barney told him. "It's a good enough disguise for the cameras, anyway-- if you just keep your damn head down."

Not going to be a problem: Clint was staring at his feet as they walked, still lost in thought. He'd still been incandescent with relief when they left the dam; the full shock of it all must've hit while they were climbing in the car. Hell, Barney couldn't blame him. He remembered the first time he'd seen Clint after he'd abandoned his brother. The come-down afterwards had hit him like a freight train— all that fear and relief and awkward rolling through his system at once. Hope and second chances were exhausting.

Clint didn't mention much about the hospital once they got inside either, which didn't shock Barney at all. It was a hospital; they all looked essentially the same after a while. Etched glass and atriums and easy-care corporately-supplied plants and dusty Mediterranean Vistas color schemes that looked like something off the set of Dynasty. His head came up a little after they got off the elevator and Barney turned them down a couple corridors. He was walking them right past the nurse's station when one of the nurses— Umar— stopped them.

"I'm sorry Mr. Francis," he said. "Family only. Is this—"

"Oh, right," Barney told him, pasting on his best *silly me* as Clint's face came up to stare at him, "sorry. It's fine, this is our cousin. Other cousin. Bernard. Francis. Bernard Francis."

"Oh! Hi, Mr. Francis. Uh. Other Mr. Francis. I'm glad your cousin found you; go right in. He might be sleeping, but he's due for a vitals check in about fifteen minutes."

Barney could still feel Clint staring at him as they walked over to Phil's room.

"Mr. Francis?" he asked, voice a little shaky.

Barney frowned.

"Yeah. Charles Francis. I told you this is a contact from an old cover, I—"

“But *Francis* ,” Clint repeated. His eyes, Barney found when he looked over, were gleaming a little. “What, you miss me?”

“Look,” Barney rumbled, trying to shove down his blush, “It was the first thing I thought of, okay?”

“Duly noted,” Clint murmured, something smug creeping into his tone that made Barney de-ruffle. “Let’s go see our cousin— Chuck.”

Maybe the de-ruffling had been premature.

“He’s right here,” Barney grumbled, pointing at the door. “Go on in. Unless you need a moment.”

Clint, who was staring at the name on the patient folder posted just outside the door, did indeed look like he needed a moment.

“Barn… er, Chuck?” he said, sounding choked.

“Yeah?”

“You are… of all the spooks I ever met, you are the absolute *worst* at aliases.”

“How am I— look, I don’t think you get to talk, *Clint Ford.”*

“ Oh I do, I really do,” Clint told him, but he was opening the door and walking inside as he said it. Which was probably why his entire face had gone drained and soft.

Barney grabbed the door from him and closed it, turning as he did to give Clint a little privacy when he saw Phil again for the first time since he was fake dead.

“Still don’t see what’s so weird about ‘Bart Clinton,’” he muttered to himself. “Jeez.”

The curtain was half drawn around Phil’s bed, a second line of defense from prying eyes. Barney heard the clatter as it rolled back, heard Clint calling softly:

“Hey, there, babe. You miss me?”

His voice was steady but the curtain rattled a bit.

“Indy?”

Phil’s voice sounded like it’d been gone over with a power sander. But it was actually a little bit better than it had been when Barney left.

“Close,” Clint said— or smiled, Barney could *hear* the smile on him— “apparently I’m your Cousin Bernie right now.”

Silence. Barney could practically feel the heat in his back from Phil’s glare.

“You let him name you, huh?”

“Didn’t get a choice… Bart.”

“Hmph. Dunno, I thought that was… kind of sweet.”

Clint snorted.

“Hey, Indy?”

“Yeah, Dr. Moore?” Clint’s voice was soft now, frantic, like a… like a gerbil or one of those angora hamster creatures.

“C’mere.”

The curtain rattled again, closing Clint inside of it. Barney let out an explosive breath, and leaned against the wall to play lookout.

From the slightly damp sound of it, they were having some sort of tender moment. Barney did not want to know. He just hoped Phil didn’t pop or pull anything vital.

“By the way,” Clint said, after a moment of blessed silence, “if this is revenge? You *way* overdid it.”

“Revenge?”

“For the cave-in,” Clint clarified. The cave-in… that had landed him in an induced coma in the hospital, if Barney is remembering correctly. His voice still *sounded* like he was joking, but of course he wasn’t. Not about that. Phil apparently knew it too.

“I… no, I… you just…”

“Because *need I remind you* , you only had to deal with thinking I was dead for a few hours, babe. I went days. *Days.”*

“I… I didn’t think you’d… it’s not like you’d found a body or anything.”

Oh my God, Phil , Barney thought.

“ *Oh my God, Phil* .”

Yeah. That.

Something shifted— a body over sheets, probably— and Phil grunted. He probably *had* pulled something now. Served him right.

“That’s not what I… Indy, I’m sorry. It was… I had to make sure it was safe, first. That no one was going to follow him to you, and anyway I needed to double-check my hunch about Barnes and— ”

“I understand how spycraft works, *Bartholemew Clinton.* I am just telling you that I have outlived you for *four days* and while I’m so fucking relieved you’re alive I’m also *extremely*

pissed off, and I also know you know *exactly* how I must have felt so don't give me any of the needs of the service bull, the *least* you can do is say you're sorry."

"… I'm sorry."

Phil heaved a shuddery sort of breath, as did Clint. And Barney, though he hoped they couldn't hear it.

"I am, I am so, so sorry, Indy."

"'Kay," Clint said, rustling again, and sounding at least a little better.

"Love you." Tiny and soft.

"Love you too, babe," Clint replied, a little choked.

"Hey, Indy?" Phil said after a moment.

"Yeah?"

"Are you crying?"

Clint sniffled.

"Little bit, yeah."

"Sorry."

"It's okay," Clint told him. "I don't mind."

They were quiet long enough this time Barney thought maybe they'd both gone to sleep. Which they both *needed* , God knew, and which would have been a relief in that at least it meant no more overheard mushiness. Still they didn't have all the time in the world. There was an international conspiracy of Nazi-affiliated cultists trying to take control of SHIELD and a surprisingly-not-dead Cold War assassin tucked safely away in a secret bunker that they needed to de-program. Nap time wasn't built in to a schedule like that.

He was just getting ready to make some kind of noise when Phil spoke again:

"Hey, so. What's with the O's cap anyway?"

"His idea of an effective disguise," Clint said, and Barney didn't need to be able to see his face to know he was being subjected to disparaging looks.

"Hey Chuck," Phil called, and Barney rolled his eyes preemptively. "You know D.C. has a team of its own now right? You don't have to borrow Baltimore's anymore."

"Excuse you," Barney called back at him, "I've invested at least a decade in the O's and that shit ain't cheap. The Nats make it another ten years, maybe I'll get a jersey or something."

That got chuckles from them both, and Barney finally levered himself off the wall and joined them behind the curtain.

Clint was sitting half on the arm of the chair by the bed, and half off, leaned over Phil so both his arms could be wrapped around Phil's good one. Phil was looking pale and blotchy still, but alive in a way he hadn't since he'd showed up at Barney's door. Clint looked a damn sight better too, and Barney only half bothered to swallow down the smile that popped up in answer to theirs.

"You've only got a few more minutes till the nurse comes," he said, "and a lot of ground to cover. So if you two lovebirds are ready, you may want to get talking…."

"Yeah, yeah, fine," Clint said, "family meeting time. Pull up a seat and let's go." And then, the jerk, he kept right on going, all "first let's debrief for Phil what's been going on at the dam, then you can debrief, then we'll assign roles and—" as if he was some kind of competent adult field agent who knew how to set agendas, and-- *and* -- as if Barney was going to be right there with him helping take down Hydra which had *absolutely* not been Barney's intention. He had been going to reunite his brother and his… brother's partner… and then keep his head down, thank you.

Well… no he hadn't.

But Clint didn't know that. Didn't *ought* to know that, anyway.

He should feel resentful, Barney thought. He really should.

And he might have, too, except his throat kept getting clogged with emotion about Clint referring to all three of them as family, so he didn't have the breath to stop him, after all.

Chapter 5: Late April 2012, An Ex-Nunnery in Iowa

Chapter Summary

Barney's running late, but somehow right on time.

Chapter Notes

Back in the ancient year of 2012, same-sex marriage was legal in five largely liberal coastal states, Washington DC... and Iowa. As Driftless is deliberately vague as to which state it's in, I'm deliberately vague on where this wedding is taking place. Just know it's a close to Driftless as a same-sex couple can get and be legally married.

Barney was so busy trying to unstrangle himself, he didn't even look up as he slammed through the nunnery doors and into the small foyer. Which was probably good, since it meant he didn't realize he had an audience for the death-struggle with his own tie until after he'd won. As he tugged the defeated neckwear straight and tucked it into the placket of his button-down, he finally glanced around. Someone was struggling to rise from a shabby, brocaded armchair in a corner beneath the stairs. The guy was vaguely familiar: shiny-headed and wire-rimmed and generic G-man shaped. Which was actually a bit of a surprise since Phil and Clint's friends had a refreshing habit of *not* being generic government agents.

The man had clearly taken Barney's measure while Barney was taking his, because he sighed and sat back down.

"Good," he said, in an also-vaguely-familiar voice, "you're here. I gave up trying to settle them down. You should head up; maybe you'll have better luck."

"Nervy, are they?" Barney asked, giving up on trying to place the guy. It'd come or it wouldn't. "Fun. Wait— are they still getting *ready* ? I thought for sure I was gonna be late."

"Oh no, you're late," the guy said easily. "But so're they. So's *everyone* . Some kind of problem with the flight— which wouldn't have been a big deal if they'd done this in DC, but they're sentimental bastards. Anyway, they're still getting ready. Or failing to get ready, as the case may be. Natasha's taken over fixing Phil up, thank God. He was second-guessing his cufflinks. *Cufflinks* . I nearly whacked him." He gestured to the crutch propped next to his chair, then sighed. "Phil is more deadly to his friends than his enemies when he's nervous."

"Aren't we all?"

Phil was— Barney had more experience with it than he'd ever wanted— but if ever there was a day to give a guy a break…. The guy gave Barney a once-over, then snorted.

"Well you go tell 'em it's go time. Be nice to get this started this century."

Barney had, belatedly, the distinct feeling he was walking into a trap.

He should just pretend it was all fine, Phil and Clint would be *just fine* , and wander out to wait for them with the others.

Instead, he said

"Can't hurt to try," and started up the steep staircase to the guy's right, trying not to trip over the tears in the oriental carpeting or bonk his head on the low ceiling at the turn. It was while trying to avoid the ceiling that it hit him.

He turned, ducking low, to stare over the rail at the guy.

"Wait… weren't you supposed to be dead?"

Sitwell— that was his name, Barney remembered now— shrugged at him, eyes twinkling behind his big frames.

"Me and a lot of other people. That's SHIELD for you."

Barney could hardly debate that. He turned and carried on up the stairs.

He found Phil in the first room on the right, a little sitting room done up Victorian-style with lace curtains, doilies, a striped sateen chaise that was probably a reproduction-- and scotchguarded to boot, given the clientele. He wondered what the Sisters would have made of their little house, if any of them had still been around to see what had been done with it. He *especially* wondered what they'd have thought of Phil,currently having his tie done up by the Black Widow while he prepared to hitch his wagon to another man. Knowing Phil, he probably had opinions on that. Barney started forward, mouth opening to ask him.

Phil murmured something to Natasha. She tugged the tie. Hard.

"If you don't shut up and let me finish, we'll never get this off the ground," she growled at him. "And then where would you be?"

"Lost, where we usually are without you," Phil told her gently. "Are you alright, Tasha? We would have been fine if you'd stayed behind."

Barney stopped with his foot in midair over the threshold and his mouth open, nuns forgotten.

"And miss this?" Natasha responded, adjusting the tie like it was a nuclear detonator, "No. I was there at the beginning, I want to be here now. Anyway, I'm… not needed. There."

The last time Barney'd heard Natasha sound like that, he had been sitting in the retiring room with her just before her Senate testimony. It was also the *only* time he'd heard her sound like that. Barney put his foot back down in the hall. Closed his mouth. Shallowed his breathing. Tried to decide if he could sneak away without being heard.

"That's not the same as not wanting to be there."

Phil's voice was doing that soft, amiable thing he did with key witnesses and cats. From Natasha's nose wrinkle, she recognized it, too.

"I want to be both places," she admitted after a moment. "But this is the right choice. James understands." Her hand stopped, laying flat on Phil's chest over the tie, and she frowned. "I think he does, anyway. I can't go changing myself now, not for anyone."

"That sounds… uncomfortable." Phil said it almost like he was quoting, and Natasha snorted like she knew the source. "But then, love often is."

"You would know."

It was practically a whisper. Phil reached up gently, and brushed his flesh-and-blood hand over her cheek.

"Never thought I'd hear that Project Franklin was a rousing success, and be anything less than ecstatic. It'll work out, Tasha. One way or another. He loves you."

She leaned into his touch.

"And I love him. Which… is why I'm here. He needs… he *deserves*... space."

"Well," Phil knocked his forehead against hers. "Sounds like the definition of love *I've* heard."

She laughed a little, a choked sound. And Barney must have forgotten to hold his breath or something, because the next moment she looked up. Her face resolved into the kind of public smile he hadn't had brandished at him since just *after* the Senate testimony.

"Oh good, you're here! Finish up with Phil, will you, and give him whatever talk one traditionally gives at these events. I'm going to go check on Clint."

She was out the door like a dart.

"I shouldn't ask, should I?" Barney said, more like an apology than an actual question.

"She probably wouldn't mind *you* knowing, not after the Tribunal." Phil told him, watching Natasha retreat. "Close the door and come on in? Some of it's classified."

Barney did as he was asked, and took the opportunity of having his back to Phil to say casually:

“Where *is* Barnes, anyway? Thought Director Hill had announced Director Fury was alive just so Barnes wouldn’t faint when they spotted each other.”

Okay, mostly casually. His voice might have tightened there a little at the end. Two years later, the Winter Soldier still gave him the creeps. He knew full well Barnes hadn't been in control of his actions— hadn’t Barney, Phil, and Natasha all helped put together the evidence for his defense?— but it was hard not to remember he’d tried to kill Barney’s brother and his… his….His. Woah.

Barney turned to look at Phil with new eyes. He was still talking about Barnes— something about being stuck in DC, and also not putting pressure on things with Bucky— but Barney’d decided he didn’t give two shits about James Buchanan Barnes. (Unless he broke Natasha’s heart, in which case Barney would figure out something that was suitably retributive but didn’t involve him dying.)

No. Barney had other concerns.

“We’re gonna be brothers,” he blurted out.

Phil blinked at him.

“Well… yes. I guess so? Sorry.”

He didn’t look that sorry— confused maybe, but not sorry. Barney cackled.

“A little late for apologies, Coulson. Should’ve made those when you proposed to Clint.”

“Never apologizing for that,” Phil said, shot his cuffs like he often did when he was trying to project nonchalant confidence. The tremor in his hand kind of ruined the effect, though, as did one of the cufflinks coming undone. Barney nearly cackled again. But hell, you shouldn’t kick a guy when he’s down. Anyway, having proof how seriously Phil was taking this kind of settled something in Barney’s gut. Which was *ridiculous* , given how much proof Barney’d seen over the years. Still.

Still.

Having had his revelation, Barney found himself incapable of following it up with anything halfway coherent on the topic, and if he didn’t distract them both real soon he was liable to get all stupid sappy or, or punch Phil in the arm or something.

“So tell me,” he said, reaching out to do up the cuff that had betrayed Phil, “what *is* the definition of love?”

“The— what?”

“What you were telling Natasha when I came in. What’s love, Coulson? Come on, it's your wedding day, you should know. Lay it on me.”

“This a test?” Phil sounded actually cautious, not teasing cautious. Barney shook his head, trying to go for a guileless look on his face and afraid he had overshot straight to gormless.

“Nah,” he said. “Genuine curiosity. After all, you *are* marrying my baby brother.”

“Yeah I am.” The smug had returned in full force. Just before Barney *did* decide to punch him in the arm, he started talking again. “Definition of love— at least, the only one I ever heard that made *sense* to me— is always wanting to know what someone needs, even if it’s not what makes them, or you, happy. To, uh, feel what they feel, like it's you feeling it.”

Well, Barney should’ve known that *Phil* was going to get stupid sappy, even if he managed not to.

“That a quote or something?” he asked, tugging Phil’s cuff straight and stepping back. “You gonna use it in your vows?”

“No, vows are pretty traditional; neither of us needed the extra anxiety.”

Or, Barney thought, to have all their spy-friends on the guest list scrutinizing their vows for secret codes or shit. Which brought him back round to Natasha.

“Natasha knows your definition of love?” he asked, and his heart fell a little at Phil’s nod. Poor Natasha. Barney cast about for something to say that wouldn’t get him killed if it got back to her. “Well,” he said finally, “she may love Barnes, but *I* got no particular feelings about him. Someone just let me know if his face needs breaking.”

That set Phil to cackling, explosive and relieved.

“Of all the things I never expected out of the past two years, the way you two get along is *high* on the list.” His hand, as he wiped it over his streaming eyes, had finally stopped shaking.

“Us redheads got to stick together,” Barney told him. “It’s a cruel world. Anyway, you and Clint think she’s family, so that makes her my family too.”

“And yet,” Phil said softly, “you’re shocked that we’re about to be brothers.”

Oh, so Phil’s tremors hadn’t gone away, they’d just passed themselves on to Barney. Neat.

“Family’s... family,” he shrugged. “Clint collects it— you should’ve seen him at the circus. Man, half the acrobats were his aunties. Or uncles. Anyway, I dunno what it is about him, but he’s always been that way. Maybe he’s making up for… well. For his own abandoning him.”

Me included.

Barney swallowed that thought down, before it set him— yet again— to running. It’d only ever made him leave, kept him from trying to *talk* to Clint for years, like if Clint didn’t know enough to keep away from Barney, Barney had to do it for him. And if *even Clint* didn’t want to see him, well….

Well, that was pointless to think about, for fuck’s sake, especially today. And *especially* to Phil, who’d tried so hard to smoosh Barney and Clint together, who’d kept pulling them back in so they could get a chance at the relationship Barney’s mistakes had nearly lost them.

Always wanting to know what someone needs, even if it's not what makes them— or you— happy . It probably hadn't made Phil happy, in the beginning, to keep inviting Barney back. Barney'd been *trying* to raise his hackles, even. Bu Phil had. He had and— well, showing up on someone's doorstep with your hand looking like ground beef can change a relationship. He and Phil had lost a lot of their sharp edges along with Phil's hand. But… brothers.

"Brothers are… big," Barney said, when his silence finally edged into awkward. "I've only had one. And you know I haven't always done well by him."

"I haven't had any," Phil told him, solemn again. He'd stepped back just a little and tucked his hands in his pockets, doing that *I'm not invested* thing he did when he was really, really invested. "But I'd say you've always tried to do well by your brother, especially given the circumstances you were in. And you've definitely done all right by me so far."

Barney nearly asked him to repeat that. He *did* shake his head to try and get the bug out of his ear. Because that *couldn't* be right.

Yes, he and Phil had done better since Hydra's attempted coup and Phil's near-death. Phil seemed to exert a gravitational pull towards shenanigans that had dragged Barney into that mess far deeper than he'd ever have dreamed, and it would've been hard to come out of that whole shebang without being friends-- or else dead. But he'd somehow thought… or he hadn't thought— at any rate, he hadn't expected the open fondness on Phil's face at the moment.

It made him want to scream.

He said instead:

"I'll… keep doing that, then," and if it came out a little scratchy well, fuck it— this was a wedding day. No one was going to notice or care.

Phil nodded at him, still looking stupidly, outrageously open— and then his eyes flicked to something in the doorway and Barney could finally breathe again. He barely registered when Melinda May stepped into the room, all dressed up in a silvery something and smiling in a way that boded no one any good.

"Mel, no—" Phil said, eyes going wide.

"Phil, yes," she replied. "I've waited a long time for this." She held up a brown paper bag and stepped past him to sit on the chaise.

"No, you don't have to. I— I was kidding."

Melinda raised an eyebrow.

"Too late now," she said, reaching into the bag.

She drew out a pair of high heels, and reached down to slip off her flats.

“Melinda, really, I was kidding, you could have come in *sweatpants* and I’d be happy to see you here.”

“Shut up, Coulson, some of us want to celebrate you definitively failing to drive someone away,” Melinda told him— then glanced up at Barney.

“I left a fifth of single-malt with Barton,” she told him, which in context he took as a dismissal.

“See you downstairs,” Barney told Phil, reaching over to give him a manly—brotherly?— pat on the shoulder before turning to go.

He was nearly out the door when Phil stopped him, looking a little too bright-eyed.

“Before you go. What we were talking about, earlier. You know where I got that definition?”

“No,” Barney said.

“Your brother,” Phil told him, then turned back to Melinda.

The door closed behind him, and Barney stood in the hall, feeling a little lost.

Clint had taken over something that had maybe used to be a small library, judging by the number of dark built-in bookshelves lining the walls. The new owners had overloaded the room with a large stand-up mirror in a gilt frame and some burgundy brocade armchairs. It left Clint and Natasha very little floorspace, and they were huddled together so Natasha could straighten Clint’s tie like she had Phil’s.

Clint was frowning into the mirror, his face scrunched up until it was nearly pouting, and as Barney watched he deliberately relaxed each muscle, stretched his jaw— and then winked at his reflection.

For a moment, Barney was right back in their trailer at the circus, watching Clint apply makeup for his act. Fifteen, sixteen— impossibly young, impossibly *talented* — and always, underneath, so nervous that he’d make a mistake and it’d all get taken away. That he’d be left by the side of the road. He’d have *died* before he told Barney any of that, but you didn’t have to be a mindreader to see exactly how much being the Amazing Hawkeye meant to Clint, and exactly how little he trusted good things to stay. On more than one night, when Barney had about had it with Trickshot, when the idea of *one more job* left his stomach feeling so turned he could taste it, he’d come back to their trailer and watched silently as Clint got ready. Some of the nausea would die down as Clint lined his eyes, and Barney’s shoulders would drop along with his as he stretched each limb.

And by the time Clint went out the door to go perform, Barney would be okay again. Resigned to helping Trick, to making sure the Bartons paid their way. That Clint didn’t get kicked out into the cold.

Again.

Then Clint's smirk faded into something smaller, more real, as Natasha finished securing his tie pin, and Barney's heart caught in his throat. That smile had nothing in common with Clint's pre-performance grins except the same lips. And this time, Barney didn't have to do anything to get Clint what he needed except accept his choice of partner. Which seemed like a pretty small thing to do. Phil might still be a high-handed bastard sometimes, but he'd burn the world down before he left Clint hanging. Barney had no doubt of that.

He must have made some kind of noise, there in the doorway— and it was probably some stupid little choked-off sound, too, judging by the tightness in his throat— because Clint's gaze swung over to him suddenly.

"Barney!" he exclaimed.

And then, his face crumpled up, smile still on it, and he started to cry.

It seemed to be as much a shock to him as it was to Barney— he jerked his palm towards his cheek to wipe off the tears, then stared at his hand like he was playing Lady MacB.

"Sorry— I just—" both hands were up at his cheeks now, and he was shaking his head while he tried to get control of himself. "I just— I dunno, this is— this is *stupid* . I'm just—"

"You're just getting married, Clint, it's fine," Barney said, taking pity on his brother— or on himself, he wasn't sure. "I bet it'll be waterworks all night."

"Oh god I hope not," Clint choked. "I have a reputation."

"Like Hawkeye's reputation can't survive a little crying on his own wedding day," Barney told him, trying for a joshing tone. "C'mon, don't pull that toxic masculinity bullshit. Cry like a man."

That finally got Clint to stop, falling into a watery chuckle. Ignoring the handkerchief Natasha was holding out, he wiped his eyes on the sleeve of his suit jacket, then advanced.

"Just happy you're here," he rasped out, pulling Barney roughly into a hug.

Barney managed to hold it together as Clint's big arms came around him and their chins hooked over each other's shoulders. Clint's hugs had gotten so overwhelming over the past couple years: less desperate, more certain. But this time the first flex of his chest against Barney's forced all the air out of his lungs, and everything shattered.

" *Shit,"* Barney hissed, as the first tears stung his eyes. " *Goddamnit* Clint."

No hope of hiding it; he was probably making Clint's collar soggy already.

"It's okay, Barn," Clint patted his back. "Your reputation'll probably make it, too."

Through his watery vision, Barney dimly registered Natasha coming up, tucking the handkerchief into his hand where it was clutching his brother.

"I'll see you both downstairs," she said gently, and started to move around them.

Clint broke away just enough to say

“Love you, best person!” and Natasha laughed her way out of the room.

“She get you all straightened out?” Barney asked as she left, trying to pull himself and Clint back onto less soggy ground.

Clint gave him a sly grin and opened his mouth.

“Skip it,” Barney cut him off. “I know what you’re gonna say, and it hasn’t been funny since you were about fifteen. I meant your *head* . Sitwell said you were pretty nervy.”

“Eh, so so,” Clint told him, backing off fully and reflexively smoothing the tie Natasha had just straightened, disarranging it in the process. “She said you saw Phil already? Give him a shovel talk?”

“Years too late on that one.”

Barney took the tie from Clint’s fingers and tugged it firmly, willing himself not to remember the first time he and Phil had met— had *really* met, not the time in the convention hall with the fursuiters. Clint glanced down at Barney’s hands, still working at his chest.

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah… gave him one the first time I saw him. Or tried to. Kinda think he was giving me one back.”

Clint’s head whipped up and he blinked at Barney.

“What? No. The first time you— when I came home to find you in our house?”

Barney nodded.

“Not that I blame him; I’d have done it too, if I found him on your doorstep after barely talking to you for… how long? I was a pretty crap brother at the time.”

“No that— look, I don’t know what he said before I got home, but c’mon, Barn, he was the one who invited you back, remember? He liked you— well, he didn’t know you, but he *wanted* to like you. Anyway, it’s not like I couldn’t have talked to *you* that whole time, either. If anyone was a crap brother, it was me.”

Clint hadn’t stepped away from Barney this whole time, and he punctuated his speech with a sharp poke to Barney’s sternum— which already ached enough.

“It was *not* you,” Barney said, pulling his hand down, feeling it warm and dry in his palm. Warm, dry— and large and callused. Adult. Grown up.

Not a hand that needed Barney to hold it anymore.

He dropped it.

“It was not you, Clint— I know how you are. How *we* are. I could’ve reached out any time instead of… sitting and *stewing* on shit and assuming you didn’t want to hear from me.”

That got him a considering sniff. Clint was watching his hands now, more than him.

“But that wouldn’t be the Barton Way, would it? Barn— I don’t blame you. You know that, right? I mean— not *now* . Maybe at fifteen, but I was a little *shit* at fifteen. And… okay, and sixteen. Fourteen. Seventee— I mean, you get the picture.”

“You weren’t that bad, Clint.”

Was that actually Barney’s voice? He sounded like a rock troll.

“Yeah, and you weren’t a crap brother. So quit it.” Clint gave him a gentle punch in the arm, and Barney looked around desperately. Last thing they needed was another descent into tears.

“You get all this wisdom from your shrink or what?” he asked, trying to lighten the mood. Clint laughed.

“Yeah, maybe. Andrew’s probably worth way more than whatever SHIELD pays him, for me and Phil alone. *God* , Barn, I never told you how fucking messed up we were at the beginning. Took a *cave-in* for us to both figure out we wanted to be together.”

Part of Barney wanted, very badly, to ask. The other part of him wanted to stay far, *far* away from anything involving Clint’s near-death experience, especially today. Of all days.

“Well whatever this Andrew did must’ve worked okay. Phil thinks you’re a love guru or something.”

“Uh, that’s not…” Clint paused, clearly working on some kind of response, his nose wrinkling in a way that boded a really bad, probably dirty, pun in the offing if he could just get it straight.

Barney cut him off at the pass.

“He said you told him that love is— and I’m gonna quote here, ‘wanting to know what someone needs, even if it’s not what makes either of you happy.' Feeling what they feel like it’s your own. That from Andrew?”

There was a moment of confusion, then he watched Clint’s face clear— a d drop open in astonishment.

“ *That* ?” he crowed. “Phil thinks—? Oh, god, no, Barney, that’s before Andrew got his hands on me. Oh my god, no— haha— okay, so, Phil had asked how I knew I was in love with someone, right? And I was so *desperately* in love with him and trying not to let him know. And that— that’s what came out of my mouth, I guess. I cannot believe he remembered.” He dropped his head in his hands, so only the tips of his red ears showed from behind his fingers. “God, I was such a *sap* .”

“I dunno,” Barney said softly, watching him and feeling a little melty himself, “sounded pretty smart to me. *And* sappy— really fucking sappy. But smart. If you didn’t get it from your shrink, where did you get it? I mean— I just. With our pa— our family, I wouldn’t have thought…. Well, you didn’t fucking learn it from them, that’s for sure.”

Then he wanted to slap himself. Their parents— their dad for certain— might be ghosts in any room they were in, any time, but the last thing he needed was them haunting Clint right now. Some brother he was. Clint shuddered, and pulled his hands down from his face. Walked backwards a couple paces and dropped onto the narrow bench to look up at Barney. Kind of lost, kind of open, kind of wary, kind of like the kid he’d been from five to… to when Barney left.

“Thing is, in a weird way, I kind of did.”

“From our *dad?”* Barney yelped. “He wouldn’t have fucking pissed on Mom if she was on fire.”

That… was way cruder than he’d planned to be. If not half as crude as Harold Barton had been to his own family while alive. Why the *hell* had he started them on this topic? They hadn’t voluntarily talked about their parents since… the circus, maybe.

“Oh, no, I know,” Clint agreed. “I remember. Wish to fuck I didn’t. But. Okay— you remember when I was married to Bobbi, yeah?”

On the whole, Barney thought saying “not while it was happening” was a bad idea, so he settled for raising an eyebrow. Clint snorted.

“Okay, bad choice of words. So, when I was with Bobbi… Barn, I tried so hard to give her what she wanted. And I just kept on fucking it up. Finally, *finally* I realized the only thing I *could* give her that she needed, was to give her up. Stop fighting and let her go, even though I loved her so bad. Dad never would’ve had that thought in his fucking life, you know that. So I figured…. I figured Dad must never’ve loved Mom, not *really.* He probably *thought* he did, but he thought a lot of bullshit. And I thought a lot of bullshit too— especially back then, *God* I was messed up, you’re lucky you were undercover— but I couldn’t actually love Bobbi, and be like that. Love can’t be love, if it’s like that. I knew *that* for certain.”

Where Clint had picked that up, Barney couldn’t think— certainly not from their foster parents. Good people, some of them, but no one who was going to put the needs of the too eager, too prickly, awkward-ass Barton boys above their own convenience. Barney’d always known the two of them had just each other to rely on. He asked— and got another snort for his trouble, and Clint looking at him like he was some kind of stupid.

“Where’d I get *that?”* he asked. “From my brother, you asshole. *I learned it by watching you* .”

The fact that he said it in that stupid sing-song after-school special voice was probably the only thing that kept Barney from… from breaking out crying. Or laughing. Incredulously.

“Clint— I fucking *abandoned* you,” he choked out.

“Oh, yeah, you were sometimes a real fucking idiot when it came to figuring out what I *actually* needed,” Clint agreed, looking like he was trying not to laugh at Barney— which was not acceptable in the middle of this conversation. “But you were a dumb kid, just like I was. You *tried* , Barn. Even when I was being a shithead, I knew you would’ve done anything to give me what you thought I needed. Even… even when it wasn’t you.”

Barney’d taken actual punches to the solar plexus from actual made men that had winded him less than this. Clint, misunderstanding, grabbed his arm and added urgently

“Which was *complete crap* , by the way. I always needed you, Barn. But I get how you got there.”

“You never needed me, Clint,” Barney managed, though it came out airless. He gulped air before continuing, shaking his head when Clint started shaking *his* , to prevent an interruption. “Not— yeah, as a kid, sure. But by the time you were the Amazing Hawkeye? All I was doing was holding you back, fucking you up. And you— *look* at you, Clint. You’re practically a legend, and you fucking know it. You’re still amazing, Hawkeye. And all the good shit you’ve gotten in your life— SHIELD, Natasha, Phil?— you got without me.”

Clint grabbed his other arm and shook him, the look on his face so skeptical he *must* have stolen it from Phil. Or maybe Natasha.

“And in the last four years, you’ve saved ‘em all for me, Barney. Anyway will you fucking stop it? *I’m* supposed to be the insecure one in this relationship.”

“Eh, it’s the family curse,” Barney shrugged— then stopped and thought, *really* thought, about it for a second. “Ugh, it is, isn’t it? Fucking Dad. Maybe I need your shrink’s number.”

“He’s SHIELD-only,” Clint laughed at him. “But he’s here— he’s married to Phil’s best person. I’ll introduce you afterwards, okay? Maybe he’s got a network of shrinks with security clearance. But for now, there *is* something I need you to do for me.”

He pulled away long enough to straighten Barney’s tie— so nearly Barney’s height now, and just a little broader. His baby brother. All grown up.

“What’s that?”

“Need you to walk me down the aisle, Barn,” Clint said, dropping the tie and patting him on the chest.

“I— you what?” Barney spluttered. Rewound his many conversations with Clint over the course of wedding planning— then re-planning, after their mission in Puerto Rico went sideways. He was fairly sure he would have *remembered* being asked….

“I need you to walk me down the aisle, Barney.” Clint repeated, looking at him a little oddly.

“That’s the plan?”

“That’s always been the plan.”

“You ah… you never asked. Did you?”

Now Clint looked taken aback.

“Did I *need* to? What— did you think I was going to have someone *else* walk me down the aisle? Nick Fury said if he was going to walk anyone down the aisle it would’ve been Phil, but we all agreed that’d be weird. Jasper’s going to do that. He’s… the closest thing Phil has to a brother so, you know, it’s symmetrical. Or at least, it will be *if* you’re walking me down.”

Barney had not, in point of fact, thought *anyone* was going to walk Clint down the aisle, had assumed that at Clint’s age, and with the way Clint had been functionally alone for most of his adult life, he wouldn’t have *wanted* anyone to do that.

But… if Clint said that was what he needed?

“Well okay,” he sighed, and held out his elbow, trying not to look Clint in the eyes. They’d already had enough goddamn tears for one wedding that hadn’t even happened yet.

Clint’s arm slid through his, strong and broad, warm even through both their layers. Steadfast. Just like Clint. Barney swallowed, and pointed them toward the stairs.

“Shall we head out?” he asked, and Clint agreed.

They took two steps— and nearly hit the doorframe.

“Crap,” Barney muttered, just now realizing the logistics were going to be a lot more absurd than he thought. Clint, at his side, laughed. “Okay, okay— we’d never make it down the stairs anyway. Maybe we wait until we’re outside for that.”

He backed off, letting Clint leave first, following him down the hall. It gave him one more chance to watch his brother, glowing in the afternoon light that streamed through the stained glass, tall and settled and certain. So far from what he could ever have imagined, when he’d aband— when he’d last seen him as a teenager. So far from what he’d ever thought he’d be allowed to see again. His brother. His only family. Well— his only family for about twenty more minutes.

“Hey Clint?” he said, pausing at the top of the stairs, suddenly feeling a little lightheaded. Clint, several steps down, turned to look up at him. “Thanks.”

“For?” Clint raised his eyebrows. *For coming back to me,* Barney thought. *For giving me another chance. For giving me another brother.* It was all too big to fit into words— and he’d talked about his feelings too damn much already. He was a *Barton* , for cripe’s sake.

“Just… thanks.”

And he followed his brother down the stairs, through a long hallway, and out into the sunlight.

Chapter 6: July 2012, Outside Driftless

Chapter Summary

Honeymoons and third wheels.

Chapter Notes

Coming in under the wire, but by my clock says it's still 2020. And, as much as I understand that we all need to be gentle with ourselves in this pandemic year, I *very* much wanted to have more than one story published in the year. Thank you all for reading, and I hope you enjoy the last chapter!

Thanks and more thanks to Gthe694e for betaing the last few chapters.

A fine mist clung to the bushes that lined either side of the gravel road as Barney drove up to the little house in the hollow. It settled softly on his shoulders as he got out, slinging the duffel over his shoulder, and walked up to the porch. The wood planks creaked lightly, just like they had the last time he'd been here.

He rang the doorbell thrice, in short, sharp buzzes, closed his eyes, counted slowly in his head and waited for the door to open. That was, assuming it *would* open. Assuming he hadn't been spotted coming up the drive and the house's residents hadn't taken to the hills.

He opened his eyes again to scan the hills for signs of scampering— and found he was standing on a mat with the words "Welcome Home, Bro" picked out in black-and-tan coir. *That* hadn't been here the last time he'd come. It was not a talk he was going to enjoy having with Basil, either, but this wasn't exactly *Jersey* . He needed to be a little discree—

"Bro," Basil said, opening the door, and Barney sighed.

"Did they see me coming?" he asked, resigned to chasing his brother— and brother-in-law— over the back pasture. Not that he exactly blamed them, after the way he'd interrupted their *last* honeymoon. Cell phone reception was atrocious out here— which was the point— or he'd have texted ahead that all was well.

"No, bro, just upstairs. Newlyweds, bro. I was leaving breakfast— then leaving."

Just upstairs . Barney grimaced, knowing way too well what that entailed.

“Call up? I’ll wait, uh… in the living room.”

“Kitchen has coffee, bro,” Basil said, going to the stairs, so Barney went into the kitchen instead.

The coffee had clearly just finished brewing in the insane fully-automated burr grinder-included machine Basil had installed for his bed and breakfast guests, and it smelled like cherries, soft loam, and heaven. (That was what it said on the side of the bag, anyway. Barney wasn’t really big on artisanal coffee, but Phil had spent enough time ranting about the cheap stuff back when he was in the hospital having his hand removed, and something had stuck.) Barney grabbed a mug, then contemplated stealing some of the cheese, prosciutto, compote, and melon Basil had set out for breakfast.

He’d barely eaten since the food court at LaGuardia. Now, his stomach was reminding him that he didn’t like skipping meals any more than he liked red-eyes or the gas station beef jerky he’d picked up on the way out of town. It was just. He hated New York *so much* that starving sounded better than one more meal within her city limits. Even a red-eye with a stopover in Chicago Midway was better than *that* .

Okay. No. He didn’t hate New York (that much). He hated Anthony *fucking* Stark, and the way he would blow up Barney’s phone at two am. Leaving his work phone in his room at Stark Tower when he decamped had made him *giddy* . Unless Stark had installed a tracking device in his shoe (and Barney had checked), he had a glorious day or so free.

Granted, Phil might be about to yell at him, but a) Phil had nothing on Tony Stark and b) Phil had *nothing* on Tony Stark. And also, Barney couldn’t *completely* blame Phil for nursing a grudge about the fact that Barney had interrupted their (first) honeymoon to tell them that an alien invasion was imminent and that several SHIELD installations had been reduced to rubble by the brother of a demigod friend of his.

(Of course, if Barney *hadn’t* interrupted them to tell Phil that his hero Captain America had somehow been brainwashed by an alien demi-god with a big pointy brainwashing stick, and was trying to help said demi-god take over the world, Phil would have divorced Clint just so that he and Barney weren’t family anymore, and Clint would have been sad. So it had never been an option not to interrupt them.)

Frankly though, Barney figured he'd already gotten his punishment. Being the FBI liaison to SHIELD through the whole mess, then getting stuck being the FBI liaison to Tony Stark for the clean-up? What more could Phil possibly do to him?

(Besides laugh? Which Phil *had* done when he found out, right before insisting that as soon as his new husband was fully-healed from the injuries he’d taken swinging into the plate-glass side of a skyscraper at thirty stories up (geez, Clint) they were going to take a second honeymoon.)

All things considered, though, they'd all gotten off light. If Loki had made someone better versed in SHIELD security and 21st Century technology his stooge instead of a supersoldier only a few weeks out of the deep-freeze, they might have had a real mess on their hands. Or if the Winter Soldier hadn’t gone off the fucking *rails* trying to get him back, Black Widow

right at his heels. There had been, Stark had said, an entire invasion fleet poised at the other entrance to that portal when he'd scanned it. The measly few huge flying alien monster-battleship-worm things that had gotten through before the device had been sonic-boomed to pieces had been bad enough.

So anyway, he could see where maybe his brother and brother-in-law might want a warning before coming down to find him decimating their breakfast. He dipped a spoon back into the rhubarb compote jar, and checked his cell phone, just for the satisfaction of seeing the no signal icon. Basil was a wizard with rhubarb, and Barney needed to remember to tell him so. He prepared to dip again.

"That is incredibly unhygenic. And I know it's not a Barton thing, because I've lived with your brother for years and he's never done it."

Barney stopped with his spoon hovering millimeters over the inviting glisten of compote and looked up. Phil was leaning in the doorway, pajama pants slung low around his waist and his arms akimbo, left hand not yet on for the day.

"You haven't *seen* him do it, you mean," Barney shot back, in retaliation for the undesired free ticket to the morning viewing of Phil's freckles he'd apparently been granted.

Phil snorted, pushing off the door jam and heading for the coffee. He waited until his back was turned to strike.

"It's not like he and I don't swap spit on a regular basis. *You* , on the other hand."

Barney put the spoon down with a heavy sigh.

"Thanks for that."

"Use a plate like a civilized person and not an FBI agent." Phil's back was still to him, but he managed to find and pass a plate over his shoulder without looking. "Also, I don't care if there *is* another alien invasion, or Stark's turned the Tower into a sentient, mobile AI, we're not leaving. I haven't been able to get up late this often since I had mono in high school."

"No fair, I had mono and Barney *still* made me get up early."

"That's circus life for you," Barney replied, turning back to the doorway to find his brother now standing in it looking rumpled and still half-asleep, and even less dressed than Phil.

Barney'd seen Clint in his morning fog and boxers every day of his teenagedom however, and he wasn't about to start being phased by it now. His brother might be bigger and more scarred, but he still had that ridiculous archer's tan on his arms and his hair still looked like he'd slept wrapped around a Van de Graff generator. He still *whined* like he was fourteen, too.

Phil, apparently, found it endearing, because he turned to Clint with a soft smile and handed him coffee. Clint thanked him, and gave him his prosthetic in exchange.

“Seriously though, Barney, what’s the disaster?” Phil asked, half looking at Barney and half at the hand he was busy inserting into its socket. It was all very futuristic and cutting edge, and Barney cut his eyes away quickly, finding his brother again.

“Nothing I did, though Stark might disagree,” he frowned. “Natasha texted that you’d left Clint’s luggage in New York, and could I bring it to you.”

“Oh,” Phil said, sounding a little wounded. “Yeah I— we were in a bit of a hurry and I didn’t notice until we were on the flight out. But you didn’t have to come all this way— and on a red eye, I bet. I’m so sorry. Clint, we could have stopped in town to get you clothes if you didn’t want to wear my clothing all this time.”

“No— Phil— no, damn, any excuse to wear your shorts,” Clint said, and suddenly Barney couldn’t look at *him* anymore, either. He glared at the compote jar and vehemently read its ingredients list. “Just… we um, we had *things* in that bag. That I wanted.”

Rhubarb, gooseberries, cane sugar, ginger, turmeric ….

“Things?”

Barney wasn’t sure why Phil wasn’t getting it, because Barney sure as heck was. And didn’t want to be. He was suddenly just glad he’d put it in baggage check rather than taking it through the x-rays at the TSA checkpoint.

“Yes, Phil, *things* ,” Clint hissed.

“ *Anyway* ,” Barney interjected, before he could be more explicit, “there’s the bag. Sorry for the interruption. I’ll get back out of your hair, let you guys get back to… to…” he waved his hands vaguely, and cringed as he realized what was about to come out of his mouth “… things.”

But before he could stand up, Phil had yanked away his coffee mug and started refilling it.

“No, no,” he said, half watching Clint as he did so, “stay for breakfast. It’s good to see you. When’s your flight out?”

Nice. Polite. Thank you, brother-in-law.

“Tonight,” Barney said, watching the mug. “But I’m zonked, I was gonna grab a hotel room in Driftless and nap a couple few hours.”

“There’s… there’s a bed here,” Clint pointed out. His face, when Barney turned to look at him, was tentative, sharp at the edges despite his morning sleepiness. “Hell you could… stay for dinner, if you wanted. Or whatever.”

Phil watched Clint with a suspiciously blank face, one eyebrow twitching upward. Barney couldn't say he wasn't sympathetic; he didn't want to cramp Phil’sstyle any more than Phil wanted it cramped. Especially with… with *things* . And stuff.

“Clint.” It came out firmer than Barney had expected, warier, and he nearly winced at his own tone. But this was… this was weird. Even for Clint. “It’s your *honeymoon* .”

“The bed’s down the hall,” Phil told him, holding back laughter.

Okay. That was… he was trying to *help* here, how did that merit teasing?

“Yeah but. Honeymoon," he said.

“It is, yeah,” Clint said.

Maybe that red eye had been a bad idea, Barney was clearly *out* of it at the moment. This shouldn’t be that hard to articulate.

“Yours. Together. That is… not…. I’ve never had one myself, obviously, but that isn’t really something you want company for. Especially not a brother.”

“I…” Clint looked away, shuffled a little, chewed his lip— he’d never used to do that as a kid; Barney had half a suspicion he’d picked it up from Phil. “Look, it’s just… you don’t gotta if it makes you uncomfortable or anything, it was just an idea.”

“Clint,” Phil said softly, “I think maybe you better open that bag, show Barney what we packed in there besides your pants.”

“That is *not necessary—”* Barney began, but it was too late. Clint had already dropped to the floor and unzipped the bag. Even as Barney yelped, Clint was already drawing out a bright, cherry red… tackle box?

He handed it to Phil and went back to the bag, rummaging until he’d found a long, thin black rod with— with *out* a flange but *with* a reel, like it was some kind of truncated…

“Fishing pole,” Barney blurted.

“Yep.”

“You… fish?”

“Thinking about it,” Clint said.

“You made me fly all the way to Driftless to bring you a goddamn *fishing pole* ?”

“He made you fly all the way to Driftless to bring him you, I think,” Phil said.

Barney felt his jaw drop, and turned, expecting to see Clint— blush, apparently. And duck his head.

“On your *honeymoon* ?” Barney repeated, looking around him for assistance and finding only Phil with a gumby look on his face like he was sucking on the backs of his lips.

“Maybe it wasn’t my brightest idea ever,” Clint confessed. “I just… look. Barn. It’s been a *great* couple weeks just being here *alone* with my husband, I’m not going to lie. Don’t think I’ve had time like it… ever. And yeah we did spend the first… three-four days doing all couple-y things, and I’m not saying I’m bored of Phil because I could *never* be bored of Phil but we made Hill give us *three weeks off* since she fucked up our last honeymoon and I got, like, lacerations all over. But it turns out I, ah, don’t maybe know what to do with *three whole weeks* of nothing to do? And neither does Phil, I’ll be very honest, and it’s starting to get maybe a little….”

“Boring,” Barney supplied, feeling poleaxed.

“Lonely,” Phil corrected him, breaking in. “Turns out isolating yourself in a cottage in the middle of a river valley with no reception of any kind, miles from civilization, is… uh… isolating.”

“So you… what… want me to stay for dinner?” Barney asked faintly.

“Actually, maybe more like the rest of the week? Just if you want to,” Clint rushed. “You’ve been going *really* hard lately too, and at least I was laid up in a hospital bed for a while, you didn’t even have that. And I know you have your tickets and you’d need to rebook them, and probably you don’t want to be away from Stark that long—”

Here, Phil and Barney snorted pretty much in unison.

“Okay but…” Barney tried to pull his objections together, to push away the part of him that wanted, very very much, to be away from Tony Stark that long, “Clint, I appreciate it, but… isn’t this the kind of thing you should ask your husband first? I can’t—”

He turned back to Phil, looking for help.

“Oh no, his husband agrees,” Phil said, smiling at him gently. “I realize it’s not a traditional honeymoon thing, Barney, but our relationship *did* start as a fake marriage, so ‘traditional’ was a lost cause from the get-go. If the point of a honeymoon is to let a newlywed couple, um, get to know each other or get used to life together, Clint and I did that long ago. If it’s to let us get away after the stress of the wedding and just take time to appreciate each other well — we already appreciate each other *pretty damn well* . I don’t know when I’ll get another time to just get to know *you* better, without all the bullshit we go through at home… and I’d like to. If you’re up for it.”

Well *that* was no good. That was no good at all. Barney couldn’t be expected to process *that,* especially on so little sleep. He turned back to Clint, bewildered, and found Clint looking at him like… looking at him like….

“You’re my brother, Barn,” Clint shrugged, almost apologetic. “You’re my brother. And I just… I… yeah. I know it’s weird.”

Basil had to have put something in the compote, because Barney was getting awfully stuffy all of a sudden. Onion, maybe. Cayenne. Laughing gas?

Barney was definitely laughing, anyway, and he was going to blame it on too little sleep and too much Tony Stark, if ever called on it.

“Well, of course it’s weird,” he said when he could finally breathe, “we’re Bartons. When did we ever do anything normal?”

The way Clint’s face lit up, he looked like he was about seven again, and they were still living in that one foster home with the big swingset out back and the lady’d just told him he could swing on it whenever he wanted. Phil lit up, too, watching Clint light up, and it was too much all of a sudden. Too much to have found again, too much to hold, too much to be a part of, too much joy expanding his ribcage.

“Just promise me *I* don’t have to wear Phil’s shorts all week.”

The way his brother— and his brother in law— broke down laughing like that, it sounded kind of like home.

End Notes

Thank you for reading! I love and adore all comments, and hold them close during trying times. You can also contact me on my tumblr. I'm cool with concrit, too, via tumblr ask or chat.

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